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The Great Space Race(ism):

How Science Fiction Predicted the Future--and How Afrofuturism Could Negate It

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in African American Studies

by

Aliyah Gabriell Symes

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Great Space Race(ism):

How Science Fiction Predicted the Future--and How Afrofuturism Could Negate It

by

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Master of Arts in African American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Sobukwe Okpara Odinga, Chair

This study examines predictive value of Afrofuturism as a means of recognizing and subsequently disrupting the orientations of power that simultaneously operate in the real world. The Billionaire Space Race is a key example of this, and I assert that the mission statement of these corporations—to live amongst stars—is not a step forward for mankind as it is represented, but instead is the ultimate neocolonial evolution of capitalism, one that would rely on the continued exploitation of labor of marginalized people. Can Afrofuturism save the future? Seminal texts in the genre suggest alternative modes of living and being that posit a more ethical and empathetic means of entering the space ways, ones that don't privilege profit over people.

The thesis of Aliyah Symes is approved.

Peter James Hudson

Scot David Brown

Tananarive Priscilla Due

Sobukwe Okpara Odinga, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

Mom,
Thanks for teaching me how to read.

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Introduction

There's an appeal to the great unknown. Looking up at the sky and knowing that we're living on a rock that orbits a flaming ball of gas in a fixed position with eight (yes, *I'm counting Pluto*) other large rocks—and countless smaller ones—as all of it hurtles through the cosmos is thrilling. I have completed countless Google searches and watched documentary after documentary about the Solar System and beyond, all of them trying to answer my burning questions. *Is there/was there/can there be life on other planets? How big is the universe? Where are we going? What are the limits of our ability to explore this galaxy—and can we stretch them? What does the surface of Jupiter look like? Is Pluto a planet or not?* The answers are provided by engineers, astrophysicists, astronauts and historians, experts in their field and in the realities of space exploration.

But for me, the best answers are to questions that are far outside the grasp of current possibility. *How would you go about encountering life on another planet? What would intergalactic diplomacy look like? How would interplanetary currency be exchanged? Would commercial spaceships have seat warmers?* The experts that answer those questions aren't scientists or mathematicians, but artists. Writers, filmmakers, visual artists, and musicians are equally capable of asking questions and coming up with the answers for themselves, taking advantage of the metaphorical black holes in our knowledge to create visionary work. *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* remain some of the most popular and profitable examples of this speculative work. However, in the same way that gravity keeps our feet firmly planted on the ground, the social status quo seems to restrict the imaginative capacity of many of the most prominent figures creating these works.

Speculative work has provided a radical way to imagine new worlds, but time and time again, the same tropes emerge. What is the encounter? *A practice of colonization or genocide*. What will society look like in the future? *Absent of Blackness*. How far will we explore the cosmos? *As far as a corporation needs to find new ways to make money*. If you could imagine anything you wanted for the future, anything at all, why does it feel like these scenarios are identical to the ones at home? I refuse to commit to the idea that human nature is so intrinsically (and it seems exclusively) tied to capitalist expansion and that the havoc that expansion wreaked will follow us into the stars into perpetuity, or that the only imaginaries that exist are the ones that stem from the people who have the most power and access to representation to be able to craft a popular narrative. When allowed to voice their perspective, what do Black people have to say about the future? Couldn't there be something different? But on the other hand, if speculative work could be treated as a predictive model, what have these predictions—that to me, just seem like a startling lack of originality—implied about how humanity's continuing foray into space travel will go?

I'll be exploring the question of predictive capacity whilst embarking on an investigation of the ways speculative creatives have engaged with the idea of humanity in outer space, and how those perspectives are shaped and informed by race. The first chapter, "Geez, I Can Write a Better Story Than That" will focus on establishing a working definition of speculative fiction as it exists today, with some analysis of the development of the genre and its historically located definitions. Theorizing speculative fiction's development from a subgenre of science fiction into its currently accepted definition as radical field of cultural production that houses multiple genres of non-mimetic writing, Afrofuturism will be housed here and further explored as a radical subgenre that disrupts Western taxonomies of literature—as well as White epistemological

perspectives on time, space, society, and ultimately the development of the science fiction genre. Looking at the authors who have been retroactively handed the role as being foundational to the genre, as well as their relationship to the white science fiction industry and the role of Black authorship within it, I will begin to unpack the ways in which Blackness disrupts white assumptions of artistic value and Black communal survival in a futurescape. Finally, the actual predictive value of Afrofuturism (and speculative fiction overall) as a means of reevaluating ways of living and being will be assessed for its ability to answer the question—Is the impossible actually plausible? And if not, what other uses does Afrofuturism serve?

Chapter 2: “Whitey on the Moon,” will look at the Billionaire Space Race as the most contemporary iteration of colonialism. Using Lenin’s theories of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism and Butch Lee and Red Rover’s arguments for neocolonialism as a contemporary iteration of that, I argue that the Billionaire Space Race is an attempt for capitalism to create an ultimate spatial fix through which it can theoretically circulate and accumulate infinitely. Plans for space colonies, lacking the ability to exploit extraterrestrial life, will continue to hinge on the labor of working-class people on Earth. Efforts to justify this colonial project will hinge around humanistic language to mitigate any negative blowback from the UN’s Outer Space Treaty, the foundation for international space law that declares space a public common that must be used for the benefit of mankind. Attempts to position the privatization of space as a public good and necessary for humanity are riddled with inconsistencies and ironies, leading to the ultimate question: should the future of humankind in space be left up to individuals who only see it as a means of continued exploitation?

Chapter 3 looks at the Billionaire Space Race thematically as a work of science fiction. The orientations of power that establish the publishing industry as dominated by white people

who represent white authors that write from white audiences are foundationally the same as those that have determined the white male billionaire status as the faces of this space race. Neither traditional science fiction authors or billionaires exist outside the societies that have shaped them, and therefore the tropes that have followed in both writing and colonial strategy parallel each other. To counteract these tropes of colonialism, violence, sexism, environmental degradation, labor exploitation, and more, works of Afrofuturism and neocolonial speculative fiction are examined for the critiques they offer and the alternative ways of living they suggest in the fact of these conditions of disenfranchisement. What does it mean to imagine a world that is more ethical, more compassionate, and more willing to respect outer space as a site of exploration and innovation and not just capitalist expansion?

Chapter 1

“Geez, I Can Write a Better Story Than That.”

What is Speculative Fiction?

Well, it’s fuzzy. To be more specific, it’s a fuzzy set. Speculative fiction has a few historical grounded definitions that have changed with time starting from the 1940s forward. It began with an effort to label a genre of literary work within the field of science fiction, but ultimately failed in being contained by any sort of strict taxonomy or rigid rules of a literary tradition. Speculative fiction doesn’t follow specific tropes or figurative elements—half the time, it doesn’t even contain itself to literature. At this point in its evolution, the only concrete hallmark of speculative fiction is its disdain for the mimetic—and the embrace of all the consequences of that choice.

Speculative fiction could be a subgenre of science fiction, but it’s also a supergenre of the “fantastic,” and also a center of cultural production, and even an amalgamation of imaginary expression, and therefore fuzzy might be the best way to describe it. (Well, better than my alternative, which is a post-Enlightenment ontological—potentially epistemological—break from a Western taxonomy of literature). In their effort to define it as a term and then historically orient the evolution of its meaning and use, Mark Oziwicz makes an argument for it as a “fuzzy set field of cultural production,” in which works are not grouped by clear and definite pre-requisites, but by their relative proximity to “a prototypical” example. Because its nature is to be an amalgamation of works that range from “exactly like” each other to “marginally like” each other, speculative fiction has become a superstructure that cradles a massive number of subgenres and that aim to disrupt the idea of the mainstream (2). Not only do the super genres of science fiction

and fantasy exist in the speculative fiction space, but also all the sub-genres that may carry their own distinct traditions or are more marginally relationally limited to the two larger super genres. The disruptive nature of speculative fiction is what makes it so critical to analyzing the social cultural impacts of this work. Science fiction as a genre resisted the Western taxonomy of literature that required any writing of value to imitate the accepted reality of the society it was concerned about. The problem with this, of course, is that the accepted reality is determined by Western epistemological supremacy. The idea that the interpretations of one's lived experience are objective, unbiased and broadly applicable to all that would consume it were summarily discarded by people who understood that determining the value and taxonomies of these texts were largely Western, White, and male. Science-fiction (for a large period of its existence) existed outside of the realm of fine literature because it imagined the impossible, and even as its popularity grew, was still subject to attempts to create rigid categorizations.

But the appeal of disruption and affecting perceived notions of reality—and ultimately changing the status quo—encouraged speculative fiction to grow as more than just a sub-genre but as a field of culturally situated works. Not only were people writing about flying cars and alien life, but they were also writing from marginalized perspectives. Women use speculative fiction to resist the patriarchy. Black people use speculative fiction to resist apocalyptic narratives of their own existence brought about by white supremacy. Queer people use speculative fiction to decry narratives of heteronormativity that would relegate all people to familial and relational structures that were enforced by colonialism. I called speculative fiction a post-enlightenment epistemological break because not only were marginalized people creating work that voiced the existence of realities and ways of being that are novel to the status quo, but

they were also creating work that radically shifted their position in the value system that assesses the legitimacy of who produces such knowledge and why.

In this way speculative fiction also becomes postcolonial work because what allowed the West power to determine categories, taxonomies, ontologies, and hegemonies was—and continues to attempt to be—the global force of colonialism. The Western structures of race, sex, and class and their embedded conditions permeated the world stage when it came to forms of cultural production and expression and determined what culturally specific practices (and therefore realities) could be kept or discarded. The collection of mimetic genres also disrupted the content of what qualifies as fiction, but also the format. Speculative fiction exists in a variety of narrative mediums that exceed simple words on a page. Operating along a spectrum “of narrative media, from print, to drama, radio, film, television, computer games...the novel, short story, picturebook, comic book, graphic novel, and poetry,” forms of speculative fiction offer clear opportunities to both imagine new stories to tell alongside new ways to tell them (Oziewicz 6).

By and large, the recurring trend in what is effectively a thought experiment is the call to inclusiveness. Different people are allowed to tell the stories, different modes of storytelling are encouraged, and different stories are allowed to be told. The sheer number of non-mimetic subgenres that can coexist within the speculative space (without vying for some sort of authority over the structure as a whole) indicates that the status quo of how people think about “fine literature” or “real” literature (and ultimately art) can be both transformed and transformative.

Afrofuturism is arguably one of the best examples of speculative fiction being both a transformation of the genre of science fiction and transformative to the communities that are touched by its culturally situated works. When thinking about the greats of the science fiction

genre, the internet will tell you that White men matter most. A quick Google search of “best science fiction”—not even a fully formed sentence—produced 1.02 billion results, the first page of them loudly declaring the “100 Best Science Fiction Books Ever Written,” (The Planets) the “Top 50 Science Fiction and Fantasy Books of the Last Decade,” (NPR) “20 of the Best Science Fiction Books Everyone Should Read” (Wired), and of course, Amazon’s Science-Fiction Bestsellers list. Every list is mostly (if not entirely) comprised of authors who are White, male, and presumably straight. The presence of authors belonging to marginalized groups is a small list that usually comprises of Samuel R. Delany, N.K. Jemisin, and Octavia Butler. The recognition of other contemporary Black authors on these lists is nominal and within the industry, a source of tension for white science fiction authors who are resistant to the shift.¹

Science fiction itself is conceived as a radical disruption to the literary lexicon because it speculates and disposes of the mimesis that characterizes “classic” literature. But though now speculative fiction serves as a superstructural classification for a myriad of works of science fiction and fantasy, science fiction’s legacy has largely been framed as a white one. The authors considered foundational to the genre, the works that are considered most prominent, and the ones who have popularized the key tropes—all of them are white, straight, and male. Ironically, it seems as though the mimesis is in the social structure of the science fiction industry to make up for its absence in the plot of the works within it. The sociopolitical superstructures that define whose writing is of value and whether it is recognized and mass produced continue to inform the genre’s trajectory. The notion that entire genre (and multitude of subgenres) of work would be characterized by an absence of Black contribution is patently ridiculous and speaks more to a

¹ Authors like Tananarive Due, Nalo Hopkinson, Steven Barnes, Nnedi Okafor, Tomi Adeyemi, Colson Whitehead, and Ishmael Reed have made incredible contributions to the speculative genre, and yet remain ignored from lists that attempt to identify the best works from the larger (mostly white) science fiction lexicon.

culture of exclusion than an actual accurate representation of the legacy of the genre. Black people could also be writers, quite skilled ones, and just because white editors were thinking of their work as science fiction does not mean that it wasn't. Being ignored by the formal (elitist and racist) taxonomy of writing classification cannot be conflated to a question of whether the writing actually existed, because it did.

Going back to a historical moment when science fiction had not even been named as a genre, Black proto-science fiction, if you can call it that, existed. It rests in a theoretical space that envisions writing as a weapon. In her *Lectures on Liberation*, Angela Davis conceptualized the identity conflict that emerged from enslavement. To be human is to be free, Davis argues. It is a fundamental right and core to the identity of being a human being is their freedom, and to be denied that freedom through the process of enslavement puts one's identity and ultimately humanity into crisis. Therefore, the enslaved person cannot be defined as human. This ushers forth a state of alienation which can only be disrupted by enslaved people becoming conscious of their humanity and pushing themselves towards freedom, and one of the ways that this is accomplished is via literacy. If the emancipation of enslaved Black Americans was a false one (falsity defined by the continued discrimination perpetuated against them through the legal, economic, and political, and social frameworks of U.S. society), then the state of alienation continues to persist—at least in part. Black writing is representative of that continued social justice work and can be considered a weapon in the history of Black liberatory work.

Moreover, if speculative fiction defines itself from distance from the accepted reality of the world, then what is a better example than enslaved people envisioning their own freedom., Cultural critic Mark Dery argues for the Black experience to be one of science fiction—because during the transatlantic slave trade were Black folks not aliens brought to a new land? How are

white people described if not as ghosts, devils, or demons in the historical record when they encounter indigenous and aboriginal peoples? In his article “Racism and Science Fiction,” Black science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany—often called the *first* Black writer of science fiction—pushes back against the title (“Racism and Science Fiction” 1). Delany began publishing in the 1960s, and he himself cites work that came in the decades before him by M. George Schulyer at the end of the Harlem Renaissance, Edward Johnson at the start of the 20th century, Sutton E. Griggs at the end of the 19th, and Martin Delany in 1857. That Black speculative work was eventually named Afrofuturism. Defined as “speculative fiction that reads African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno culture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future,” works that questioned race, space, technology, and society were given a home to rest in. Dery coined Afrofuturism because he thought that there was alien-ness to the Black experience and that there’s something to be said about imagining freedom in conditions of subjugation. Its growth into a radical theoretical space is rooted in that resistance—not just to unfreedom, but to Western conditions of existence, especially when the texts are contextualized historically. Race becomes a condition that informs writings that reevaluate time, space, society, and technology, its consequences reverberating in both the real and speculative worlds.

Raced Artists and Raced Art: Foundational Figures and Seminal Works

I’ve established that this speculative genre is radical and disruptive to the status quo of Western literature and belongs to a history of activist work for African Americans. But more than a theoretical framework of cultural critique, the rise of Black speculative writers was first

and foremost a hobby. These writers did not emerge into the literary space with the strict intention of becoming “Black” authors. The raced nature of their renown is externally applied due to the social conditions that they live in and the people around them.

Samuel R. Delany, admittedly cautious about his positioning as a founding member of the genre, fell into science fiction because it was there. “I read it. It was in front of me” he said.² His popularity rose after he published his first work, “The Jewels of Apator,” under a pen name. With a career spanning more than 60 years, Delany has been the recipient of some of the most prestigious awards in the genre, including three Nebula Awards and two Hugo Awards. His skill as a writer in the genre should therefore go unquestioned. But he understood the underlying social hierarchies that existed in the genre, because literature as a form of cultural expression and production do not exist outside of the rules that define the social constructs that shape it. He saw this in the general resistance of White male writers whenever his work was awarded. Accepting Black storytelling into predominantly white value systems was akin to “abandoning the old values of good, solid, craftsman-like storytelling.”³ Presumably, authors like Delany did not enter the field thinking their own work was worthless because it came from a Black author, a Black perspective, or a Black experience. “The racial situation, permeable as it might sometimes seem (and it is, yes, highly permeable), is nevertheless your total surround. Don’t you ever forget it . . . ! And I never have,” he wrote.⁴

But the implicit othering of Delany from others threw that identity—and therefore its uniqueness to the field—into starker light. The question of whether a story or the writer is

² Bebergal, Peter. “Samuel Delany and the Past and Future of Science Fiction.” *The New Yorker*, July 2015

³ Delany, “Racism and Science Fiction.” p4

⁴ Ibid., 5

actually *good* or not—by any metric—becomes increasingly irrelevant when the validity of that work’s existence is determined by the assumed validity of the author’s. Delany, living through the 40s, 50s, 60s, and onwards had to deal with white skepticism surrounding the capability of Black people to make worthwhile art in comparison to white. In essence, the existence of minorities in science fiction, a new genre that was supposed to be radical in its absence of the mimetic, was a transgression. And the existence of minorities in science fiction *stories*—well, that was unthinkable. The limited Black representation in the field meant that their presence stood out all the more in white spaces, and therefore triggered racial anxieties for white people resistant to diversifying the genre.

Delany’s experience trying to publish his stories—known for playing with the boundaries of intimacy, sexuality, and belonging—were sometimes blocked by the white-dominated industry’s inability to grasp the Black protagonists in technologically advanced environments. He was writing in a genre that “was indeed characterized by gee-whiz futurism, machismo adventuring, and white, heterosexual heroes” and whose conceptions of Blackness (and therefore Black communities) revolved around a perceived correlation to apocalyptic decay.⁵ How do you market Black stories when the presence of Black people in the bulk of science fiction is one of misrepresentation or strategic absence? He and other Black authors had to—and still do—push past these limits that are overt manifestations of the white perceptions of Black artists and experiential value, but the circumstances that made his—and other retroactively named Afrofuturists—work that of a pioneer allowed for it (and him) to be “reframed as social change

⁵ Bebergal, Peter. “Samuel Delany and the Past and Future of Science Fiction.” *The New Yorker*, July 2015

agents”.⁶ His numerous works—*Dhalgren*, “Aye, and Gomorrah,” *Babel-17*, *The Einstein Intersection*, *The Motion of Light in Water*—have actively contributed to a legacy of writing that defied most Western conventions of propriety and belonging.

Speaking of propriety, Octavia Butler’s (whose most famous works include *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*) writing origins are infamous—she saw a B-rate horror movie and said:

"Geez, I can write a better story than that." And then I thought, "Gee, anybody can write a better story than that." (Laughter/Applause) And my third thought was the clincher: "Somebody got paid for writing that awful story."⁷

Butler’s early writing career was characterized by failure (she even hoarded her rejection slips until she realized it was an unhealthy habit). But she didn’t stop writing or submitting to magazines and publications—and it wasn’t because of some great anti-racist ambition. While Afrofuturism can function as a form of cultural critique and writing can function as a liberatory tool, Butler wrote because she liked to. Being defined as a raced writer happened due to external social forces. Her work in science fiction, while inadvertently including social critique and political motifs, was motivated by the historical contexts around her. She grew up during the Space Race and the Red Scare, which motivated investment into public education through science programs. People were going to the moon, and the media was pushing forward

⁶ Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. 1st ed., Independent Publishers Group, 2013.

⁷ Butler, Octavia. “*Devil Girl From Mars*”: *Why I Write Science Fiction*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 4 Oct. 1998.

messaging that implicitly felt like science fiction had become cool. “I fell in love with the idea of knowing, or at least believing, that I knew what was going on,” said Butler.⁸

What Butler also knew was the weight of social imposition. What she was supposed to be or aspire to as a woman—small, white, with a voice that ranged in the higher octaves—she wasn’t, and she was harassed for it. 6 feet tall by adolescence, with a voice that had “a gentle rumbling tone and pitch varying from androgynous to masculine,” Butler was labeled as a man or a lesbian by her classmates, pushed into categories of perceived wrongness because she didn’t adhere to the social norm.⁹ But while other adolescents were quick to dismiss and disparage her, Butler instead ruminated on these ideas of sex, gender, and conformity. Her experiences directly influenced the trajectory of her writing, and radically reimagined the role of gender so that it existed outside of societal expectations, absent of meeting male approval or adhering to gender or color-based social hierarchies.¹⁰ “If I had to change myself into something else,” Butler continued, “I’d probably be unhappy.”¹¹ In *Kindred*, a neo-slave novel that remains one of her most popular works, she explores gender non-conformity in her protagonist, a critique of American history, an untangling of master-enslaved person dynamics, the prospects of an egalitarian society, the relationships of trauma to historical memory, and the complicated role of religion as both ostracizing and inclusive. Her *Parable* series (or *Earthseed*), which includes *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, looked at religion, speculation towards future modes of living, and provided a scathing critique of corporate greed, environmental degradation,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bellott, Gabrielle. “Octavia Butler: The Brutalities of the Past Are All Around This.” *Literary Hub*,

¹⁰ Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. 1st ed., Independent Publishers Group, 2013.. pp 136

¹¹ Ibid.

and the conditions of wealth inequality. As a writer, Butler's work is deeply emblematic of what the "inclusivity" of science fiction should have been—a means not just for cautioning society to the potential sociocultural trajectory of American life, but also for imagining truly unique, unprecedented ways of living that understand and learn lessons from the past, instead of forgetting them in favor of a post-historical, post-racial, and post-human future.

But authors aren't the only individuals capable of envisioning the future. As mentioned earlier, speculative fiction allowed imagining alternative futures for not only the novel format, but various other forms of writing as well. Comic books, graphic novels, poetry, film, television and other forms of narrative media were allowed to take space in the more inclusive genre. However, narrative media extended from the visual into the auditory, seeing as some of the most significant Afrofuturists—both before the naming of the genre and the contemporary 'after'—were musicians. Sun Ra and Parliament Funkadelic are two of the most notable Afrofuturists in its history, using its themes across sonic and aesthetic mediums.

Herman Poole Blount (who legally changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra), also known as Sun Ra, combined avant-garde experimental jazz music with philosophy and theatrics. Born in 1914, he spent his prolific career creating what he called "space music"—the combination of music and technology that could be capable of healing and transforming the world. Claiming Saturn as his mythical home, he became a living metaphor for the isolation and ostracization that characterized the Black experience in a segregated America.¹² After all, 'alien' and 'other' are synonymous, and he toyed with that concept enough to be considered a foundational figure of Afrofuturism. He subscribed to his own "cosmic philosophy" in which his performance of

¹² Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. 1st ed., Independent Publishers Group, 2013.. pp 74

blackness also sent a message of progress, a future society in which African Americans could keep pace with the promises of technological advancement. He handed out pamphlets with his musings on the interrelationship on race, space, and metaphysics, often performed dressed in costumes that toyed with temporality—evoking Ancient Egypt and the imminent Space Age. He performed on sets that appeared downright extraterrestrial with his band the *Arkestra*, not only disputing ideas of the collapse and disappearance of Black communities in the future, but idealizing their existence on other planets, with his music ferrying listeners ever closer towards that vision. If prejudice was going to position Blackness as ‘alien,’ then why not imagine them as extraterrestrials in their own right?

Sun Ra channeled his music, philosophy, and aesthetic into a film called *Space is the Place* (1972). In 1971 Sun Ra offered a lecture course as an Artist-in-Residence at the University of California, Berkeley (African American Studies 198, variably described as “Black Man in the Universe” or “Black Man in the Cosmos”).¹³ Biographer John Szwed described Ra’s lectures as a combination of “neoplatonic doctrines; the application of ancient history and religious texts to racial problems; pollution and war; and a radical reinterpretation of the Bible in light of Egyptology,” and they attracted the attention of producer Jim Newman.¹⁴¹⁵ *Space is the Place* is partially inspired by those Berkeley lectures and revolves around the plot of encouraging African Americans to settle on a new planet through the medium of music and the help of Ra himself, who is cast in the principal role as an interdimensional time traveler. Despite its flaws—it’s a

¹³ “Sun Ra’s Full Lecture & Reading List From His 1971 UC Berkeley Course, ‘The Black Man in the Cosmos.’” *OpenCulture*, 21 July 2014, <https://www.openculture.com/2014/07/full-lecture-and-reading-list-from-sun-ras-1971-uc-berkeley-course.html>.

¹⁴ Szwed, John. *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*. Da Capo Press, 1997.

¹⁵ Though his lecture course prevented taping—members of Sun Ra’s band the *Arkestra* allegedly walked around the lecture hall to prevent it—some of his lectures from the course are available online.

cheaply produced film when it comes to costumes, settings, and special effects, and nobody in the film is winning any awards with their performances—its release is historically situated in the era of Blaxploitation films that rendered Blackness as a caricature often adjacent to criminality, even if the role of Black people as the heroes or villains (as opposed to side characters) was novel. *Space is the Place* took itself as a serious commentary, as Adilifu Nama explains:

Although the look and feel of the film are similar to those of these other “cheesy” parodies [Black derivatives of white SF film], *Space is the Place* is undeniably a serious SF film... [within in, there] rests a robust racial discourse of black nationalism, the failed promises of white liberal integrationism, and the vacuous nature of American materialism as a reward for blacks who do not challenge the status quo and the social consequences of those who do.¹⁶

The film concludes with the Earth being doomed as a byproduct of its inability to give up racism, and a small population of Black people escaping to their new planet on Sun Ra’s ship, both providing a cautionary message and a dissatisfying solution: that America is on a direct path to self-destruction so long as it subscribes to racist ideology and half-steps when it comes to equality, and that Black people’s ideal solution is to abandon it. *Space is the Place* becomes a fantasy of racial escapism, and a queer echo of the phrase “why don’t you go back to where you came from?”, something Black people have been largely unable to do since they were cut off from their ties to Africa during the transatlantic slave trade. But this notion of escapism in the

¹⁶ Nama, Adilifu. *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*. University of Texas Press, 2008. pg 156

cosmos wasn't isolated to Sun Ra, though he remains one of the earliest Black Afrofuturist figures to do so. In a way, his character in *Space is the Place* is an apt metaphor for Ra's role in the speculative subgenre—he was a pioneer, looking upward into space and outward into time to envision a liberatory future for Black people.

Sun Ra isn't the only musician that looked up at the sky and envisioned a way out. In his music, his imagery, and his performances, George Clinton channeled Afrofuturism into his art to create a “cosmic soundscape” where funk was the future.¹⁷ His music collective (which over the decades took many forms) operated under the “Parliament Funkadelic” (or “P-Funk”) umbrella, and functioned almost like its own universe, with all the smaller groups and musicians orbiting Clinton and P-Funk like the planets around the Sun. P-Funk also operated under its own collective mythology, creating characters, stories, themes and ideas that started with the original groups “Parliament” and “Funkadelic.” Clinton admits his love of science fiction repeatedly in his memoir, being enamored by the “brilliant concepts and...amazing realities”.¹⁸ Speculation had always been embedded in P-Funk's work, considering that one of their earliest albums, *Chocolate City*, envisioned a Black president in 1975, three decades before it happened in reality. That mythology was also promoted aesthetically with album art, music videos, costumes, and theatrical performances—at one point, Clinton was touring with a model spaceship known as “The Mothership,” piloted by Clinton's alter ego “Dr. Funkenstein,” which was also the cover art for the album *The Mothership Connection*. Used primarily during the P-Funk *Mothership* tour, the ship would be called down using the gospel vocals of member Glenn Goins amid lights and

¹⁷ Mason, Amelia. “George Clinton, Sun Ra And The Sci-Fi Funk of Afrofuturism.” *WBUR*, 2 Mar. 2014, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2014/03/02/george-clinton-afrofuturism>.

¹⁸ Clinton, George, and Ben Greenman. *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard On You?: A Memoir*. Atria Books, 2014. P 173

pyrotechnics and was an extremely literal representation of what Clinton wanted to accomplish with his music. “For *Mothership Connection*, we went even further afield and imagined a black man in space...Space was a place but also a concept, a metaphor for being way out there the way Jimi Hendrix had been. Imagining a record in space was imagining artistry unbound, before it was recalled to Earth.” For Clinton, Earth and all its semantic meaning was a restriction for what his music could aspire to be—and metaphorically, where Black people could go by engaging with it, and the lyrics to “Mothership Connection (Star Child)” exemplify that:

Well, all right!
Starchild, citizens of the universe, recording angels
We have returned to claim the pyramids
Partying on the mothership
I am the mothership connection
...
All right, all right, Starchild here
Put a glide in your stride and a dip in your hip
And come on up to the mothership
...
Are you hip to Easter Island? The Bermuda Triangle?
Heh heh! Well, all right, ain't nothing but a party!
Starchild here, citizens of the universe
I bring forth to you the good time
On the mothership
Are you hip?
...
Starchild here, citizens of the universe
Gettin' it on, partying on the Mothership
*When Gabriel's horn blows, you'd better be ready to go*¹⁹

Clinton and Parliament’s song serves multiple roles. It begins as an introduction, a reminder, an announcement, and a challenge. Starchild, a character designed to traverse the space ways and bring Funk to the people of Earth, lets everyone know that he has arrived. By

¹⁹ Parliament. Lyrics to “Mothership Connection (Star Child).” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Parliament-mothership-connection-star-child-lyrics>

returning to “claim the pyramids” he—whether intentionally or not—invokes the popular Black nationalist myth that Egypt was a Black civilization, casually elevating the socio-historical placement of Black civilizations as primitive. The announcement, of putting “a glide in your stride and a dip in your hip,” was a call to dance and ultimately celebrate the opportunity to “climb aboard the mothership” and be taken to new worlds. Metaphorically, it is an encouragement to listen to the music, but also to *feel* it. Clinton is asking for the audience to become a part of this speculative voyage from start to finish. Easter Island and the Bermuda Triangle, both sites attributed with spiritualism, mystery, and the supernatural, are re-inscribed with a new mythology that renders them as sites of extraterrestrial fun, because “it aint nothing but a party!”

Parliament is trying to encourage the listener to defy social convention and if they can’t understand everything that’s going on, to at least take the small steps to join them on their mission through the imaginary. “I bring forth to you the good time,” Starchild offers. “Are you hip?” This, more than anything, is an opportunity for the audience to interrogate their own role in the status quo. As Ricky Vincent explains, “the symbolic connections of P-Funk concepts to one’s earthly struggles for freedom were felt by many listeners, particularly Black teenagers.”²⁰ The semantic connections that Parliament successfully created with Black youth encouraged breaking out of the societal structures that limited self-expression and self-determination. What did it mean to envision oneself differently, and then live according to that ethos? Parliament could help you do that. But it came with a caveat. “When Gabriel’s horn blows, you’d better be ready to go.” If you were too slow, you would be behind.

²⁰ Nama, Adilifu. *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*. University of Texas Press, 2008. pg 161

By the *Mothership* tour, P-Funk's membership had risen to roughly forty musicians, whose talents and range resulted in music that Clinton described as "genuinely kaleidoscopic, capable of everything from doo-wop to heavy rock to jazzy horn arrangements."²¹ It allowed experimentation with sound that pushed the boundaries of what defined Funk music. That, paired with the sheer scale of the musical mythology across so many mediums—lyrical, aesthetic, sonic, and visual—created its own universe and sent a message of Black representation and self-determination in a time where Black films and public-facing artistic work was fading. In the late 1970's, the decline of Blaxploitation films meant that any opportunity to engage Blackness with other genres (like science fiction) was rapidly disappearing. P-Funk's science fiction, including "George Clinton's music, comic book-liner notes, and graphics became virtually the only medium for the presentation of black SF imagery" at the time period, and a massive theoretical breakthrough when it came to Clinton's "grand visions" of a Black worldview that worked hand in hand with modern technology and aesthetics, as opposed to outside of it.²² Not only was Clinton a pioneer when it came to music, he was a pioneer in advancing new ways of thinking about Blackness and its relationship to technological advancement.

These creators were theoretical revolutionaries, spearheading a new legacy of speculative work that was always increasing their distance from the ironies of a science fiction that oriented itself around a given status-quo. In "Racism and Science Fiction", Delany recounts his awards speech for "Aye, and Gamorrah...", saying that "I write the novels and stories that I do and work on them as hard as I can to make them the best I can."²³ Their work, always aiming for more,

²¹ Clinton, George, and Ben Greenman. *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard On You?: A Memoir*. Atria Books, 2014. pp 192

²² Nama, Adilifu. *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*. University of Texas Press, 2008. pg 160, 161

²³ Delany, "Racism and Science Fiction." Pg 5

wasn't necessarily an effort to promote Blackness in the science fiction space. Remember that all these creators were retroactively added as foundational figures after Afrofuturism was named in 1994. However, the unrelenting effort—of Butler's repeated attempts to get herself published, despite regular rejection, of the white derision of Delany's work despite its critical success, or the general population's lack of comprehension of what Ra and Clinton were trying to do with their music—of Black people to have their voices heard and their new ideas shared make them representational of what speculative fiction should truly be: critical, inclusive, and boundary-breaking. The strategies they employ to break these boundaries—and were briefly mentioned in this section—include playing with temporality, space, technology, and even society.

It's About Time

One of the most radical epistemological boundary breaks in speculative fiction texts—and especially Afrofuturistic ones—is the conception of time. The genre itself does significant work in retroactive identification—finding older evidence of Black speculative work and then enfolding it into the Afrofuturist canon. Speculative imaginings of time remind readers that it is a culturally situated concept, and that the ways individuals orient their lives is largely informed by the social conditions they develop in. Time as a linear concept—one that is constantly *and only* pushing forward, largely existing outside the influence of the events that came before it (ones that are also unshifting, unchanging, and locked into the stone of 'pastness') is a Western construction. It consists of "formalized reference points" that exist in an elaborate mechanism of classification (years, months, days, hours, generations, periods, eras) that is highly structured along scientific lines (Hallowell 647, 648). It is not a "sequence of experiences" so much as a database for collective and individuated human history, effectively removed from any semantic

or metaphorical meaning. Normative science fiction views discourses on time—and disruptions to it—as a relationship of cause and effect. Past moments are cemented in place and inform the present in that changing the then will inevitably change the now. Paradoxes and changes to that primary construction of time are seen as undesirable or even disastrous. Films like *Back to the Future* are solid representatives of this. But websites like the *Black Quantum Futurism Collective* understand that the flow of time can be understood and conceptualized differently in relationships that aren't fixed in their classification or orientation to each other.

A collective dedicated to “exploring the intersections of futurism, creative media, DIY-aesthetics, and activism in marginalized communities through an alternative temporal lens,” the Black Quantum Futurism collective looks at multiple levels of Black experiences (from the individual to collective) to help conceive new forms of spatio-temporal consciousness. Seriously considering popular characterizations of Black temporality (“Black/Colored People Time”) as well as new, more inclusive and intersectional ones (“Afro diasporic time” and “Black womanist time”) as potential modalities of existence, they dissect the ways that popular and upcoming Black speculative films disrupt the accepted ontologies of time. Time is more than just a measurable construct; it has various relationships to unquantifiable aspects of consciousness. With memory, facts and experiences can fade, shift from varying perspectives, be rendered suspect by outside influences, and reemerge at any moment. *Eve's Bayou* (1997), directed by Kasi Lemmons, examines how memory can shape and be shaped by in this way from the perspective of a child who grapples with her father's infidelity and suspected incest.

Time can also follow non-linear paths, sometimes behaving cyclically—where the people experiencing it are stuck in the same patterns of violence or trauma that can span generations. *Candyman* (1992), directed by Bernard Rose, and its sequel of the same name by director Nia

DaCosta (2021) elaborates on this with the existence of the primary antagonist—the Candyman, who exists in an atemporal space until he is invoked. He seeks (admittedly irrational) vengeance for his lynching by terrorizing a poor Black community in the 1992 film, functioning as a metaphor for inner-city violence and communal dysfunction. In the 2021 sequel, DaCosta changes Candyman’s primary motivation to enact violence against White people who commodify and destroy Black communities and experiences through the process of gentrification. But despite his transition from a villain to a sort of anti-hero, Candyman remains paradoxically frozen in his role, unable to be liberated from the grasp of the conditions of his traumatic death. As time passes—Cabrini-Green, the Black community, shifts from a dilapidated housing project in 1992 to a mostly-white gentrified space by 2021—and the setting changes, the nature of Candyman remains the same, as he continues to inflict harm across time and space.

As evidenced by these works, the Black relationship to trauma as it resounds through generations implies a uniquely complex relationship with time. Like Butler’s *Kindred* argues, “historical novels are also always contemporary novels,” and the socio-historical relationships Black people have to Western history will continue to defy Western concepts of time and space so long as the institutions that enabled those relationships (and traumas) remain unchanged.

Space is OUR Place

Space is also redefined in Afrofuturism as it branches away from Western colonial thought. Here, space is defined as a site of occupation, whether that occupation be tangible or intangible. On geographic, physical, and social levels, whiteness occupies a large amount of it. Geographic space is to be owned, tied up in legal documentation and capitalist modes of exchange. It’s discovered, occupied, stolen, bought, sold, inherited, disputed, developed,

exploited, and ultimately treated as a commodity. Cultural relationships to geographic sites, buildings, and even entire regions are largely considered irrelevant in the grand scheme of a social order in which everything is owned. Colonialism had a direct role in carving up geographic space in around the world, attributing massive regions to imperial powers and claiming ownership over the people within them and any natural resources they may hold. The frontier mentality, the doctrine of discovery, *terra nullius*—all of these justifications helped establish land and the “uncivilized” people within it as waiting to be claimed by more developed countries and people. It helped explain away the lack of consideration for the already existing cultural groups that spread across the continents and the way that this separation disrupted them both internally and across communities. The abrupt cut off of access and pathways to communal resources and violent shifts to the existing systems of social organization were often instituted through forms of militarism. Entitlement to the resources within areas of geographic regions resulted in accelerated environmental exploitation that decimated not just the human communities living within them, but entire ecosystems. Space is employed strategically to reinforce the structural organization of the status quo as well, with contemporary examples—including the history of redlining in the United States, that systematically restricted Black homeownership to designated spaces that were actively separate from more affluent white communities. Redlined areas were consistently poorer, under-resourced, and highlighted the socio-economic gaps between white communities in the United States in comparison to Black ones. It is also, like time, a system of organizing something into clearly defined, structured categories. Regions, countries, cities, neighborhoods, streets, individual households—everything is a unit made to be as clean and concise as possible. These relationships whiteness and its

institutions had to geographic space for their own benefit were indisputably violent for marginalized communities left to suffer the consequences.

Physically and socially, white people take up a tremendous amount of room. Their overrepresentation extends across industries, institutions, and interpersonal hierarchies. With that extreme overrepresentation also comes a large amount of social capital—and therefore power. The contemporary phenomenon of a “Karen” (or a white woman breaking recognized rules of civility because of the tacit understanding that they can get away with it with the assertion of white female fragility and victimhood) does not exist outside of the historic vacuum of white women weaponizing their femininity for their own benefit, usually at the expense of marginalized groups. “White Flight” to the suburbs in the period of post-US industrialization as a response to Black migration into urban city-centers represents the ways in which white people make claims to (segregated) space and the lengths they will go to maintain it. A safe white space is one that is characterized by an absence of Blackness.

White people speak the loudest, speak the most, and using their social capital, manipulate the conditions around them to achieve a favorable result. The proliferation of white, heterosexual, male-oriented stories in the media underscores that relationship—which is what makes diverse storytelling in the mainstream so exciting. The ability for white people to dictate who gets to occupy social space also impacts the ability for diverse storytellers to have their representational opportunities. Samuel R. Delany references his book *Nova* being rejected by a white science fiction magazine editor because the idea of a Black protagonist in a future environment was so implausible to market.²⁴

²⁴ Delany, Samuel R. “Racism and Science Fiction.” *New York Review of Science Fiction*, no. 120, Aug. 1998. Pg 3

Traditionally oriented science fiction, for all it brags of its non-mimetic nature, tends to reify the status quo. Militarism and colonial conquest remain some of the most popular tropes within the genre. One of the greatest examples in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, which contemplates the predicted end of a massive galactic empire and envisions the solution as settling new areas in the galaxy to create *another* empire, and *War of The Worlds* by H.G. Wells, which envisions the conflict between invading Martians (coded as non-white) and the (white) humans on Earth. But speculative fiction "rejects the 'science for the West, myth for the rest' mindset informing traditional Western non-mimetic genres—especially fantasy and science fiction, with their often colonialist and imperialist visions of spiritual or technological (con)quests," especially with the way these ideas are centered around space.²⁵ Using non-Western ideas of race and space, the Black diaspora (notably not in the US) thinks about the utilization of space differently. Geographically, how space is claimed and utilized are categorically different. Geography is reinscribed with semantic meaning, irrespective of the way that it's organized along a Western context. Alternatively, its importance regarding ownership (and keeping that ownership) is reduced. Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* and P-Funk's *Mothership Connection* abandon their Earthly environments or encourage Black people to do so in favor of looking for new homes on extraterrestrial planes. With a galaxy full of options, why remain rooted to places where memories and systems of violence are as just as much a part of the metaphorical environment as the topography? Physically and socially, the presence of whiteness becomes minimized or erased entirely to reclaim space. Some of the earliest work of Black science fiction imagined worlds in which white people simply don't exist. *Black Panther* (2018), one of the works credited with bringing

²⁵ Oziewicz, Marek. *Speculative Fiction*. Oxford University Press, Mar. 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78>.

Afrofuturism into the contemporary public sphere, revolves around the relationship of Wakanda, an extremely isolated African country with extraordinarily advanced technology, to the African diaspora.^{26 27} Wakanda leans into the stereotype of an impoverished African nation in its political and diplomatic interactions with the rest of the Westernized world while it hides its technological innovations despite the fact it could benefit people suffering from inequality.

Wakanda's history of isolation and non-intervention into global events—including but not limited to the transatlantic slave trade—have created a society that exists outside of the grip of white intervention. It imagines an African country untouched by colonialism and slavery, but grapples with its complicity in these processes by not aiding the rest of the diaspora in stopping it. Wakandan scientists use technology to create shields that erase Wakanda's real appearance off the map—transforming geography as it was chartered by Western cartography. On the other hand, some sites retain their full spiritual and semantic value—all the Wakandan tribes come together to a specific outcropping of rocks that border a river to perform a ritualistic ceremony to determine the next king of Wakanda and holder of the Black Panther title on two separate occasions in the film. While the film makes questionable assertions—it positions oversimplified versions of the ideological stances of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X against each other and summarily presents the stance of the Black Panther Party—self-defense—as a heartbeat away from retaliatory violence against white people, it was the first instance of an Afrofuturist film to be wholly embraced by the mainstream. It won three Academy Awards (including Best Picture)

²⁶ It is specifically the Black Panther film (2018) directed by Ryan Coogler that is considered Afrofuturistic work for the purposes of this paper. That being said, the Black Panther character that the film is based on was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, two white men. For the purposes of this analysis—and due to its largely accepted adoption into the Afrofuturist canon—I'm separating these origins from the film itself.

²⁷ Coogler, Ryan. *Black Panther*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018.

and Golden Globes each, surprising considering that both voting bodies are regularly criticized for its non-diverse membership and exclusionary submission policies that limit the ability for non-white films to even be considered. Regardless, *Black Panther*'s relationship to space regularly circumvents Western perceptions of its importance geographically and semantically, as well as reevaluates what it means to take up social space as a Black person without it being reduced to a caricature of Blackness.

Society and Technology

One of the most pervasive caricatures of Blackness that inhabits science fiction has long been historically located in the original justifications and observations for colonial conquest: primitiveness and social decay. Because the tools that pre-colonial Africans used had a little resemblance to the more industrialized technologies that colonial powers employed in their day-to-day lives, Africans in their new racial category became associated with primitiveness. The clothes they wore, their spiritual practices and religious figures, their social hierarchies, their lack of written language—or rather, their use of oral cultural traditions rather than written ones — everything about the ways that Africans lived indicated that they were ‘other’, and that otherness was lesser. These perceptions directly impacted the way that Africans were treated throughout the transatlantic slave trade into contemporaneity. Black people are still subject to representations across all forms of narrative media that represent them as technologically deficient and socially dysfunctional.

While access to technology is largely determined by socioeconomic standards, which are in turn determined by a political economy that reinforces ever-widening racial wage gaps, the idea that an entire race of people remain in some sort of metaphorical dark age when it comes to

technological advancement is a lie. This perspective fails to take into consideration the technologies that Black people have invented that they do not get credit for, as well as the relationships Black people have to technology in the ways that they form communal bonds today. The whitewashing of an entire historical record of Black accomplishment is intentional to continue to render Blackness as deficient and incapable of advancement. Ytasha Womack describes her surprise at looking at the scale of Black invention upon her visit to the “Black Inventions Museum” exhibit at the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, Illinois. “The shock was the sheer volume of inventions, how they span every aspect of daily life, and their impact on the science world...But the show was so all consuming, even the casual visitor had to wonder, “Is there anything a black man or woman didn’t invent?”²⁸ This lack of knowledge lends itself to the larger conversation of representation, and what it means for Black people—especially Black youth—to grow up in environments where, because they do not see themselves in tech oriented fields, they do not feel capable of contributing to them professionally. But there are countless circles of Black people engaging with technologies and the digital space, and part of the problem behind many people’s ignorance to that relationship is the fallacy of what science fiction has positioned technology as and what the reality looks like. In his interview with Mark Dery, Samuel R. Delany points out that “the sign language is more complicated than you give it credit for” because science fiction images present the future as “shiny, glittering, polished technology.” Instead, the most portable forms of tech in the 90’s “came in matte-black, plastic boxes.”²⁹ But these existing relationships to technology and its

²⁸ Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. 1st ed., Independent Publishers Group, 2013.. pp 66-67

²⁹ Dery, Mark. “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose.” *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Duke University Press, 1994. pp 192

invention have drastically shifted from the 1920's-60's in which the focus was building—or hardware. Today's relationships to technology are about access to the commodity, and less and less about how it works and how to fix it ourselves. Access to the distribution of these commodities does not represent access to their formation, argues Delany—Black people don't get to decide what to make, how it's made, and how it will be organized, and that unequal access extends itself to the creation of the Digital Divide (the role of socioeconomic conditions in affecting the access of individuals to information of communication technology).³⁰ Black relationships to technology and the defining aspect of its relationship to science fiction is not the use of what already exists, but instead the alternative imaginings that can be created with that technology—or its *misuse*. He cites DeeJay culture's use of scratch and sampling as it emerged from that culture of desecration and paired it with lyrics containing social critique, resulting in a speculative corpus. Musically, Sun Ra and P-Funk did the same. Sun Ra's music was characterized by how experimental it was, using emerging forms of musical technology like the Minimoog synthesizer and the Outer Space Visual Communicator, which rendered sounds into color reflected on a wall.³¹ He considered music itself as its own tool, constantly manipulating it to best promote his Afrofuturist philosophy. P-Funk disregarded the boundaries of musical genres and constantly combined them in their work, while adding sonic effects using production tools to make things sound “more alien” when necessary. The Mothership was a to-scale model of a UFO that they made descend from the ceiling of their venues, using available technologies to simulate the conditions of an alien arrival. In literary texts, technology was not the defining

³⁰ Ibid., 193; *Understanding the Digital Divide*. OECD, 2001, <https://www.oecd.org/digital/ieconomy/1888451.pdf>. pg 5

³¹ Vääätänen, Päivi. “Sun Ra: Myth, Science, and Science Fiction.” *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2014, pp. 40

feature, but simply a facet of the lives of the Black people who lived with it. Most of Samuel R. Delany's work is oriented around imagined future societies in outer space—something that isn't achievable without the technology to get up there. All of this rejects the idea that Blackness functions in opposition to advancement.

As these texts indicate, Blackness isn't defined by the social conditions that restrict it. While ideas of primitiveness and social decay have resulted in apocalyptic interpretations of Black futures in white science fiction, Afrofuturism dismisses those interpretations as ludicrous. The most extreme interpretations of this apocalyptic future are most aligned with the habit of traditional science fiction authors to not think about it at all. Black people are largely absent in the most popular science fiction works—there are a handful of Black actors in the nine Star Wars films that currently exist (ignoring how certain characters are coded as Black)—and are often swapped out with depictions of 'aliens' that share stereotypical characteristics often associated with Black people. *Predator's* extraterrestrial antagonist was a massive, overtly strong, murderous beast that had a face akin to an African mask, seemed to be wearing dreadlocks, and the white protagonist could only hope to be on its level by slathering mud on his face and acting closer to a beast than a man.³² The typical options in science fiction films were futures absent of Black people and futures in which Black people were only there metaphorically, to reinforce ideas of white dominance and Black social deficiency. Afrofuturist works disrupted that narrative by making Afrofuturist work. An entire race of people cannot die out if narrative works continue to contemplate a future in which they thrive. Black Panther, the *Patternist* novels,

³² McTiernan, John. *Predator*. 20th Century Fox, 1987.

Dhalgren, Janelle Monáe's musical universe—all of it imagines more for Black people than their assumed failure to move into the future.

Ultimately, Afrofuturism wouldn't exist without the relationship between Black society and technology. The absence of a historical past does not summarily predict a trajectory towards an apocalyptic future, and Afrofuturism deigns to imagine a world where Blackness not only exists in the future but thrives absent of contemporary conditions of oppression. But do those imaginaries hold any weight in foreseeing the future? Does speculative fiction in general have that capacity?

Prophecies and Predictability

Can speculative fiction predict the future? Sometimes it's come close. Octavia Butler's *Parable* is often hailed as near oracular in its critique of corporations and widespread ecological devastation brought on by climate change. But common sense, an expansive imagination, and luck do not qualify as predictive models of technological and social development. The key difference between works of science fiction as it predicts humanity's future and say, a weather machine, is that one is grounded in fact—and that fact is quantifiable.

Predictive models need numbers, equations, and statistics. They mine past data and combine that with probability to assess the most likely outcome. None of these things are prerequisites when it comes to the creation of speculative fiction. While authors can—and frequently do—look at the technologies of the past and present and contemplate future adaptations (like flying cars in *Back to the Future* and holographic communication systems like in *Star Trek*), its own form of data mining, the future societies that speculative authors envision are educated guesses at best. More than what is predictable (which I associate with what is nearly

inevitable), I argue that for some writing, the worlds imagined are more about what is *plausible*. It is an effort to convey merely what can happen, not what *will*.

But just because speculative fiction can't be used as a predictive model for telling the future in real life didn't mean that authors didn't try. In the early 20th century, there was a philosophical shift in science fiction thinking. Prominent writers believed that it was important for writers to consider rejecting the past and focus on the innovations (and implications) that were emerging or *could* emerge in an era of human history where technology was evolving at extraordinarily rapid rate. H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Aldous Huxley, Isaac Asimov, and Ursula K. Le Guin—some of the biggest writers in the science fiction genre—were all notable futurists. Asimov himself made some groundbreaking predictions, including coining the term “robot” and asserting that their use would revolutionize society's labor dynamics and the widespread personal access that everyday people had to computer technology.³³ But what's interesting about futurology is that its applications haven't been relegated to the exclusively fictional space. Governments, corporations, and academics have incorporated speculative or prospective studies into their frameworks, seeing the value in imagining new innovations that they can then capitalize on. Science fiction writers are seeing an increasing number of jobs emerge in politics, consulting, and the corporate world. Entire academic fields have emerged in “strategic foresight” and “scenario planning,” all oriented around imagining potential futures³⁴. Critics, however, remain wary. What about writing a space opera of epic proportions makes one qualified to make predictions about public services or potential international conflicts? About economics? And

³³ “Asimov's 2019 Predictions - Fiction or Fact?” BBC, 2 Jan. 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-46736024>.

³⁴ Eveleth, Rose. “Can Sci-Fi Writers Prepare Us for an Uncertain Future?” WIRED, 12 July 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/sci-fi-writers-prepare-us-for-an-uncertain-future/>.

oftentimes in the corporate space, speculative predictions often orient themselves around maintaining current social conditions as opposed to objectively considering the ethical implications of technological development. “Speculative design” considers probable, plausible, and preferable futures, and those futures are highly dependent on the perspectives that are crafting them.³⁵ What emerges from the influences of economic and societal norms is “affirmative design,” which reinforces the previously defined status quo. If power is largely centered in the hands of White, straight, anglophone men irrespective of industries or professions, then the ideas and tropes that circulate speculative work is bound to parallel or ‘predict’ some of the ambitions of those same people in power in the real world. If Asimov’s prediction of space colonization eerily echoes Elon Musk’s fixation with getting to Mars, then maybe Asimov’s not so much an oracle and more of a means of reification. The clear lack of critical engagement with who is doing the designing and for what purpose makes this embrace of the speculative distinct from subgenres like Afrofuturism that fully embrace opportunities for social critique. Journalist Eveleth Rose looks at the state of science fiction to make real world predictions and remarks that while the ambitions of this field are hopeful, “in actuality, history shows us that predictions are nearly impossible to make and that humans are catastrophically bad at guessing what the future will hold,” and being a good enough storyteller to get people to invest in your predictions does not automatically make them credible.³⁶

Octavia Butler herself shied away from being deemed a prophet for how close to home *Parable of the Sower* hit in the decades after its publication. “This was not a book about

³⁵ Burdick, Anne. “Meta!Meta!Meta! A Speculative Design Brief for the Digital Humanities.” *Visual Language: The Journal of Visual Communication Research*, vol. 49, no. 3, Dec. 2015, pp. 12–33.

³⁶ Eveleth, Rose. “Can Sci-Fi Writers Prepare Us for an Uncertain Future?” *WIRED*, 12 July 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/sci-fi-writers-prepare-us-for-an-uncertain-future/>

prophecy; this was an if-this-goes-on story. This was a cautionary tale, although people have told me it was prophecy. All I have to say to that is "I certainly hope not."³⁷ By if-this-goes-on, she meant that certain behaviors inevitably wrought certain results. The impact of capitalist behavior on both social inequalities and the global climate had already been recognized—1993 was seven years out from the 2000 United States Presidential Elections when Democratic candidate Al Gore ran on a campaign oriented around environmental protection. Understanding that a problem, if let to exist unchecked, would likely become infinitely worse is more of a commonsense conclusion than anything else. Her work addressed contemporary societal concerns as she hypothesized what solutions or alternatives could be conceived in that scenario—namely using religion as a pillar of support in the face of oppression, and having that religion become a form of escapism (the religion, named *Earthseed*, aims for humanity to reach its ‘adulthood’ by living responsibly on other planets). It can be argued that Butler is making an oppositional prediction: this is the worst-case scenario, and it may happen if these problems continue unabated, but hopefully what she envisions will never come to pass. Envisioning the future better allows the reader to critically think about the role the present plays in creating it. Like Daniel Kahneman suggests in *Thinking Fast and Slow*, “slower thinking, like defamiliarization, can circumvent our assumptions, bypass our prejudices, and shock us into fresh and often more accurate awareness of our surroundings.”³⁸

³⁷ Butler, Octavia. “*Devil Girl From Mars*”: *Why I Write Science Fiction*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 4 Oct. 1998.

³⁸ Romano, Andromeda. “How Can Fiction Predict a Future That’s Already Happening? Andromeda Romano-Lax on the Real Stakes of Speculative Fiction.” *Literary Hub*, 13 July 2018, <https://lithub.com/how-can-fiction-predict-a-future-thats-already-happening/>.

Ultimately, the point of Afrofuturism isn't about the technology itself—it's about the social conditions around it. It's about how the characters shape—and are shaped by—the tools available. The existence of these conditions sometimes seems inevitable because the problems predicted in the imaginary future are often parallel to the ones that exist at the time of publication. Predicting the future, the technology, and the society is less about the excitement of innovation and more about its impact—and the potential that impact has to make either positive or negative changes.

Afrofuturism: More Than Just a Hobby

If Afrofuturism can't predict the future, is it good for anything except racial escapism? What's the point of Black people moving forward in time, or back, or upwards into the cosmos, or erasing white people from existence—is it only for the opportunity to imagine something different? What's the point? Representationally, socially, and critically, the subgenre has had significant impacts on the Black people who have engaged with it. However, that doesn't mean that Afrofuturism's development has been utopian. Multiple critiques have emerged because of the genre's orientation and the risks of its critical and political capacity weakening.

Afrofuturism was primarily a project of representation. I argued earlier that for the most part, the foundational figures of the speculative subgenre were not making explicit attempts to “Blacken” science fiction—especially since the primary contributors to Afrofuturism were added to it retroactively after its naming and theoretical development in the 1990s. But that does not change the fact that they were Black people creating works of Black science fiction in societal conditions where it did not exist—where white people did not want it to exist. They helped pioneer an environment where other Black folks could imagine livelihoods for themselves as

writers, musicians, and filmmakers. Sun Ra and P-Funk's work is directly correlated to the massive Afrofuturist universe that contemporary artists like Janelle Monáe have crafted for themselves, interrogating sexuality, gender, and technology's role in creating systems of surveillance. Outkast and Missy Elliot, hugely influential figures in the hip hop genre, have both invoked Afrofuturist themes and aesthetics in music. Outkast has a career-spanning preoccupation with cosmic elements—their 1996 album *ATLiens* use the common motif of Blackness and themes of isolation and actual aliens. Missy Elliot's music videos and aesthetics span two decades of visual work, often encouraging people to think of people like her in alternative environments (her music video for "Pass that Dutch" included a group of Black people afflicted with a dance-inducing disease in a post-apocalyptic Earth, wildly dancing under the beam of a UFO).³⁹ In some cases, that representational capacity spread to other industries as well. Nichelle Nichols (the actress who played Lt. Commander Uhura in the original *Star Trek*) was hugely influential in NASA's publicity efforts to diversify its application pool. Through her consulting firm Women In Motion, Inc, she helped increase the application pool from 1,600 (less than 100 women, and 35 minority candidates) in the seven months before her consulting firm began its work to 8,400 (1,649 women, 100 minority candidates) four months after they started.⁴⁰ Nichols made sure to dispute the idea that the inclusion of diverse candidates was a form of affirmative action that would ultimately dilute the quality of the work that NASA would do, asserting that women and minority candidates were just as capable of technological rigor and

³⁹ Say It Loud, "What Missy Elliot Did for Afrofuturism," *PBS Digital Studios* video, 12:50, August 9, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/video/what-missy-elliott-did-for-afrofuturism-exk33c/>

⁴⁰ carrington, andré m. "Space Race Woman: Lieutenant Uhura beyond the Bridge." *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 68–89. p85

innovation. Programs that encourage minorities in STEM roles aim to disrupt the field's white male dominance.

Outside of STEM, there's an increasing investment in Black visual storytelling. Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* received a pilot order from HBO in 2021, and production studio A24 acquired the film rights to *Parable of the Sower* that same year. Similarly, *Wild Seed* and *Dawn* are being adapted by Amazon studios and *Kindred* received a series order from FX. *Black Panther's* sequel is currently in production by Marvel Studios (owned by Disney), and Nnedi Okarafor's novel *Binti* is being adapted into a tv series by Hulu (a streaming service).⁴¹⁴²

Outside of representation in film and technological industries, Afrofuturism has encouraged the formation of entire digital communities. As I mentioned earlier, the importance of Afrofuturism isn't necessarily that the technology exists, but how its use shapes and is shaped by others. Alondra Nelson, who helped expand the theoretical breadth of Afrofuturism, created the Afrofuturism Listserv (an early internet discussion pool) in the late 1990s as a means for students and artists to come together to discuss "technology, space, freedom, culture, and art with science fiction as the centrifuge."⁴³ A community that could be formed without respect to geographic limitations, Nelson utilized technology to imagine novel ways of communicating and sharing ideas—especially when it came to crossing divides between fans and creators, with award-winning author Nalo Hopkinson and theorist Alex Weheliye being members—and pushed

⁴¹ McConnell, Kelsey. "Octavia Butler Adaptations in Development." *The Portalist*, 13 Dec. 2021, <https://theportalist.com/octavia-butler-adaptations-in-development>.

⁴² Goldberg, Lesley. "'Binti' Adaptation From Michael Ellenberg in the Works at Hulu (Exclusive)." *The Hollywood Reporter*, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/binti-adaptation-michael-ellenberg-works-at-hulu-1269204/>.

⁴³ Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. 1st ed., Independent Publishers Group, 2013.. pp 32

back against the harmful narratives that discourse around the “Digital Divide” exacerbated when it came to the perceived relationship of Blackness to technology. In this case, technology helped maintain the community through its continued evolution—the Listerv began on AOL, became a Yahoo! Group, then made its way to Google before it became its own website. The Black Science Fiction Society⁴⁴ is also a major digital meeting point for Black science fiction fans and creators, with 66 subgroups that a member can join dependent on their interests, professional goals, or relationship to community events or publications.

There have been a multitude of events or exhibition spaces that allow the different ways people view Afrofuturism to overlap. Book, film, and TV conventions allow creators to interact with fans about their work (though Samuel R. Delany does criticize major conventions’ habit of putting Black authors together in panels because they’re Black, not because of similarities in their work), while academic ones allow more theoretical and/or political work to take place. In January of 2022, the Smithsonian’s Afrofuturism Series held “Claiming Space: A Symposium on Black Futures – Past, Present, and Potential,” a virtual symposium that took theorized on the role of space in Afrofuturism. It “examine[d] the ever-expanding reach of Afrofuturist thought across oceans, into land reclamations, up to the stars, through cyberspace, and inward as Black visionaries look to the infinite space within.”⁴⁵ The Oakland Museum in Oakland, California’s “Mothership: Voyage into Afrofuturism” exhibition (2021-2022) aims to celebrate the Black imagination through a multimedia approach, including photography, costumes, film, music, and writing. Older exhibits, like the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture’s 2015

⁴⁴ <https://blacksciencefictionsociety.com/>

⁴⁵ The Smithsonian Afrofuturism Series is a collaboration between the National Air and Space Museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the National Museum of African Art. <https://airandspace.si.edu/learn/highlighted-topics/afrofuturism/claiming-space-symposium>

“Unveiling Visions: The Alchemy of the Black Imagination” or The Studio Museum in Harlem’s 2013-2014 “The Shadows Take Shape” that explored the contemporary art through Afrofuturist aesthetics—all these events, exhibitions, and collections aim to increase public knowledge about Afrofuturism and share it with communities around them.^{46 47} It’s become a practice of virtual and physical community building and learning and a way to establish a historical relationship to both technology and cultural expression that was considered unimportant to the larger historical record.

In the same way that literacy became liberatory work—and therefore the act of learning or teaching people to read and write became activist work—Afrofuturism is considered by some to be political. In Tiffany Barber’s 2018 round table interview “25 Years of Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Thought,” she argues that “black aesthetics *has functioned as* black politics”⁴⁸ and the other interviewees Sheree Renée Thomas, Reynaldo Anderson agree. Thomas Remarks that she “want[s] more out of my Afrofuturism,” noting that it has the potential to be suppressed in the same way that other Black cultural renaissances in the United States (like the Harlem Renaissance—which was overtly political) have been. The aesthetic value of a work doesn’t automatically mean it lacks political power, and Reynaldo Anderson notes that Afrofuturism as it exists today is a pan-Africanist project. The work of Afrofuturism is decolonial, enfolds the global Black diaspora, and can be political if it highlights the social gaps “where you *should* be

⁴⁶ <https://museumca.org/exhibit/mothership-voyage-afrofuturism>

⁴⁷ <https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/unveiling-visions-alchemy-black-imagination>

⁴⁸ Barber, Tiffany E. “25 Years of Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Thought: A Roundtable with Tiffany E. Barber, Reynaldo Anderson, Mark Dery, and Sheree Renée Thomas.” *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 39, Spring 2018, pp. 136–44. Pp139

looking... It [Afrofuturism] provides a compass so we—black people—can forecast and *do* what is needed to take care of ourselves, our communities, and our environments.”⁴⁹

Mark Dery, however, is concerned about aesthetics—which is one of the first critiques of Afrofuturism I will address. Dery is primarily concerned about commodification and consumer capitalism—interest in a subject, object, idea, or aesthetic results in wanting to make money from it. It removes all meaning from something that was once rich in it (note Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose art and philosophy were a sharp critique in support of class struggle and against colonialism but is now used constantly to sell products for massive corporations after his death), essentially defanging its political potential as it instead makes it a “transgressive lifestyle statement”.⁵⁰ Afrofuturism has utility so long as it isn’t being used to uphold systems that facilitate oppression, like capitalism, and instead continues to rebuke it. Art’s relationship to activism is rooted in its help in envisioning forms of racial justice and sociopolitical change, and efforts have been made to bring art, fans, activism, and the academy together. In 2011, the Think Galacticon conference was held in Chicago, Illinois at Roosevelt University, and its attendees attempted to think through new perspectives on social change and privilege.⁵¹ Event organizer and activist Adrienne Marie Brown looks to science fiction to generate real-world solutions. She uses Octavia Butler’s texts and “teaches activists how to use strategies from Butler’s books to build communities in areas where resources are scarce.”⁵² Through her work, maybe Afrofuturism can help change the future instead of predicting it.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 140

⁵⁰ Ibid., 141

⁵¹ Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. 1st ed., Independent Publishers Group, 2013.. pp 226

⁵² Ibid., 228

Another critique of Afrofuturism rests in its origins. Earlier, I argued that the works produced within this fuzzy set of speculative fiction are decolonial and radical. This is true. But Afrofuturism was primarily envisioned to look at African American works, which excludes most of the African diaspora. The themes and concerns that Dery defined as signifiers of the genre were less applicable to other Black people around the world. What does it mean to have a literary subgenre that looks at Blackness and its evolution, and it fails to recognize the iterations of Blackness outside a Westernized context? 25 years after the name was coined, Tiffany Barber's round table discusses it. "Afrofuturism begins with Africa," explains Reynaldo Anderson, and "Afro-futurism is moving beyond its American-centric origins."⁵³ In a continuing project of self-determination, Afrofuturists around the world and in Africa are defining what Afrofuturism means to them. Nnedi Okarafor, a Nigerian American author, went so far as to change the term. On her personal blog, she argues that she needed to regain control of how she was defined, because her books were being misunderstood so long as they were being interpreted under the theoretical lens of Afrofuturism. She named it "Africanfuturism":

"Africanfuturism is similar to "Afrofuturism" in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West."⁵⁴

⁵³ Barber, Tiffany E. "25 Years of Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Thought: A Roundtable with Tiffany E. Barber, Reynaldo Anderson, Mark Dery, and Sheree Renée Thomas." *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 39, Spring 2018, pp. 136–44. Pp144

⁵⁴ Okarafor, Nnedi. "Africanfuturism Defined." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, 19 Oct. 2019, <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html>.

In decentering the Western focus of Afrofuturist stories, Nnedi and other Africanfuturist or Afrodiasporic speculative artists can broaden the scope and depth of both the social critique and diversity of futurities. From an activist lens, it can also make the envisioning of solutions that much more expansive.

At the end of this chapter, the only definitive conclusion I've come to is that Afrofuturism cannot tell the future. It spans space and time, re-envisions societal formations, and operates within a historical framework of political resistance. It is constantly evolving, because what Afrofuturism was almost three decades ago when it was named is not the same Afrofuturism that exists today. Its scope is interdisciplinary, its forms span any medium that can manage it, and for a project rooted in the imaginary, it produces tangible consequences in the way we reevaluate our own histories and how we form digital communities. As its role as a pan-Africanist project gains ground—and therefore the works recognized as Afro/African-futurist increase exponentially, I wonder what the future of this form of cultural expression will look like. I wonder how it will contend with the still rapidly evolving technological innovations we see all of the time. I especially want to see how it contends with the Billionaire Space Race unfolding in real time as the world clamors to colonize the cosmos—which feels like a recipe for disaster. And maybe Afrofuturism, while not a surefire way to tell the future, could potentially be a way to save it.

Chapter 2:

Whitey on the Moon (A Real-Life Science Fiction Epic by White Guys, for White Guys)

*Was all that money I made las' year
(for Whitey on the moon?)
How come there ain't no money here?
(Hm! Whitey's on the moon)
Y'know I jus' 'bout had my fill
(of Whitey on the moon)
I think I'll sen' these doctor bills,
Airmail special
(to Whitey on the moon)*

—*Whitey on the Moon*, Gil Scott-Heron

A rocket explodes upwards, nose pointed towards space: the final frontier. Well, sub-orbital space—the frontier’s pit stop. In it, dressed the part of someone asserting their manifest destiny, is a middle-aged billionaire in a cowboy hat with boots to match. He will tread where no man has tread before—the inside of his own rocket. Jeff Bezos (for all his accessorizing) isn’t a pioneer in space flight and won’t be walking on an unexplored planet—he won’t even be exiting Earth’s atmosphere. People have already been up into the cosmos (there’s an American flag on the moon, a super-telescope circling idly around the Earth, an International Space Station with astronauts currently residing in it, and a small family of rovers—active and defunct—on the surface of Mars). Jeff Bezos, space cowboy, is propelling himself into the Great Known, where several people *have* been before. But what makes him so unique is what he—and more importantly, his money—represents.

Jeff Bezos, founder and Executive Chairman of Amazon, is one of two billionaires that have personally made it into space through their own private (state-contracted) companies in the last year. The other is Sir Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group conglomerate and

known for known for partying with recently retired U.S. Presidents.⁵⁵ Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla hasn't wrangled his rocket ship into the space ways, but he rounds out the group as the third figurehead of the Billionaire Space Race.

While the Space Race of the 1960s was a flexing of national power—especially between the former Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War—to prove who had the technological advantage and capability when it came to spaceflight, the Billionaire Space Race is a contest of private enterprise that revolves around creating new industries to generate capital. But underneath this (oversimplified) explanation, one where rich guys want to make more money and maybe colonize mars while they're at it—the implications of this race aren't just exorbitant expenditures for the sake of some rich man's ego, but a nigh-apocalyptic warning about the fate of capital itself. In this chapter, I will explore the differences between the Space Race of the 60s and the Billionaire Space Race in both motivation and cultural relevance, the historical (and rhetorical) tools used to justify the endeavor, and finally, the chief critiques of this new venture.

Let's Talk About SEDS, baby

(Or, how it all started)

The Billionaire Space Race's chief difference from the Space Race of the 1960s is highlighted in the phrase itself. While the first Space Race (heretofore called Space Race 1) was a public facing contest between two global superpowers, the Billionaire Space Race (Space Race 2) is just that—for billionaires. In the 1980s, Peter Diamandis founded Students for the Exploration and Development of Space (SEDS). As an entrepreneur, he was disappointed in the lag in the development of industries surrounding space—in his mind there was endless potential

⁵⁵ Obama having a joyride on a jet ski immediately after his presidential term ended is going to live in the popular imagination forever.

in its commercialization. Diamandis eventually kickstarted that development on his own terms, launching the X Foundation, which aims to foster technological innovations for the “benefit of humanity.” This foundation awarded the Ansari X Prize in 2004 to the first non-governmental organization to launch a reusable crewed spacecraft into sub-orbital space twice within a two week-period. The lack of government funding was intentional—the goal was to show to participants and the greater public that space flight was feasible and accessible (an extremely relative use of the term) not just for private businesses, but for civilians as well.

The winner of that contest was the experimental spaceship SpaceShipOne, financed by Paul Allen (co-founder of Microsoft) and designed by Burt Rutan. The design and technology were later purchased by Sir Richard Branson for use by his company Virgin Galactic. The updated design—named SpaceShipTwo—was used in Branson’s’ successful trip 50 miles up into the atmosphere in 2021 (not reaching the Kármán line, the internationally recognized edge of space, but instead the U.S.’s cutoff. He made the trip a week before Jeff Bezos.). Virgin Galactic’s current plans are to build a small fleet of SpaceShipTwos for both commercial Space flight and space science missions.⁵⁶

The contest didn’t end when SpaceShipOne became the winner of the Ansari X Prize, and it didn’t end when Branson beat Bezos into space by a week. Instead, this competition continues, arguably into infinity, as this industry continues to develop in real time. Musk, Bezos, and Branson’s companies all orient themselves around the same core mission: space as a private commodity from which they can extract profit. But their personal intentions behind the privatization actively affects the way their businesses look. It also affects the way the public can

⁵⁶ “Home: Virgin Galactic.” *Home | Virgin Galactic*, Virgin Galactic, <https://www.virgingalactic.com/#landing-curious>.

gauge who the winner of this “contest” is. The billionaires are aiming for something, but for each, that something looks a bit different. Branson is chiefly focused on Space tourism, having listed flights on his VSS Enterprise for sale since the early 2000s.

Musk’s’ interests are more varied, with SpaceX not only containing a tourism element, but also a stake in colonialism. Musk’s mission statement revolves around “making humanity multi-planetary” and to eventually colonize Mars. His company has worked at that goal while simultaneously ferrying satellites and technology into orbit for paying customers through his “rideshare” program. His Falcon 1 rocket became the first privately funded spacecraft to reach orbit in 2008, as well as the first commercial spacecraft to deliver cargo to and from the ISS in 2012.⁵⁷

Bezos’ BlueOrigin is like Musk’s SpaceX in that its mission is twofold. According to the Blue Origin website, it seeks to serve all “civil, commercial, and defense customers,” becoming more than just a resource for wealthy tourists looking to see the Earth from a new angle.⁵⁸ The mission statement of the company, more than facilitating space research and commercial curiosity, seeks orient future space innovations with the intent of pushing humanity and its militaries into the cosmos.

Comparing the three major companies in Space Race 2 is more difficult than it looks, primarily because most of the means of gauging who is ahead in the contest are trite. Who made it up to orbital space first? *Technically Musk, in 2008.* But who physically did? *None of them.* Who made it to the edge first? *By US standards—Branson. But by internationally recognized ones? Bezos.* Which company is more successful? *According to number of successful launches*

⁵⁷ “Mission - SpaceX.” SpaceX, SpaceX, <https://www.spacex.com/mission/>.; “Rideshare - SpaceX.” SpaceX, SpaceX, <https://www.spacex.com/rideshare/>.

⁵⁸ “About Blue.” Blue Origin, Blue Origin, <https://www.blueorigin.com/about-blue>.

and government contracts? Musk. But on the other hand, which company loses when it comes to space litter? *Also Musk, who is responsible for a Tesla roadster currently orbiting the solar system.* What about cost of a ticket—one of the chief arguments for space tourism is to make it accessible to civilians, so which company is the most affordable? *Spoiler: None of them.*

Depending on the question being asked, the answer always changes on who ‘wins’ this ongoing campaign into the stars. But does the winner matter so much as what the race itself has come to represent? Maybe not, because Space Race 2 is more than an effort to become the first ultra-rich white guy to walk where only rovers have been before; it has become the solution to an issue of apocalyptic proportions.

Dragon Tales: How to Hoard Your Wealth in Space

In 1917, Vladimir Lenin published *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.⁵⁹ Developing on the ideas outlined in Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, Lenin outlined the historical arc of capitalism and its development from a feudalist framework to its latest stage, an imperial project. Lenin argues that bank (money) capital and industrial (commodities) capital combined to form finance capital. For capitalism to generate unprecedented profit, business was exported to underdeveloped countries in order to extract labor for less money, which in turn “influences and greatly accelerates the development of capitalism in those countries to which it is exported,” a sort of financial diffusionism.⁶⁰ That financial behavior inevitably divides the world into sectors controlled by geopolitical powers and monopolist companies (monopoly capitalism).

⁵⁹ Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Zhizn i Znaniye, Petrograd, 1917

⁶⁰ Ibid., 47

Geopolitical conflicts emerge over the control of these exploitable resources, under the assumption that capitalism will become “overripe” in the countries where it was intentionally developed, partially due to the violently exacerbated inequities that occur because of rampant labor exploitation.⁶¹ That becomes a threat to the value of that capital as it is supposed to be circulated, as well as the potential of that wealth to continue to increase. Finding new locations, resources, and even industries that are sufficiently underdeveloped becomes necessary for that process to continue—this is called a spatial fix.^{62,63} Alongside the evolution of capitalism as a global imperialist project, we also see the increase in speculation to conceive of new “potential sources” of investment due to the increasing rapidity of present-day technical development.⁶⁴ Lenin therefore argues that imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism as the world is carved up into sectors for of center-periphery belonging, with the center being the imperial core to the developing region’s periphery.

But does this framework apply to a post-imperial world? Despite the “end” of empire during the age of Emancipation—in which colonial powers abolished their use of enslaved labor and/or relinquished their formal colonial control—the emergence of finance capital still ensured the exploitation of working-class populations in underdeveloped economies. While nation-states

⁶¹ Ibid., 47

⁶² “As long as capitalism remains what it is, surplus capital will be utilised not for the purpose of raising the standard of living of the masses in a given country, for this would mean a decline in profits for the capitalists, but for the purpose of increasing profits by exporting capital abroad to the backward countries. In these backward countries profits are usually high, for capital is scarce, the price of land is relatively low, wages are low, raw materials are cheap.” *ibid.*, 46

⁶³ Shammas, Victor L., and Tomas B. Holen. “Capitalism and Outer Space: Replies to an Interlocutor.” *Dr. Victor Lund Shammas*, 18 Dec. 2019, <https://www.victorshammas.com/blog/2019/12/17/capitalism-and-outer-space>.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 63

didn't formally own other sovereign nations, their associated banks and (then) nationally located corporations stepped in to take that position. However, at the same time we also see the multi-national conglomerates begin to create distance when it comes to their relationship with nation-states, typically to avoid regulation.⁶⁵ In essence, rather than a post-imperial era of economic development, we're seeing a neo-imperial or neo-colonial enterprise. *Night Vision: Illuminating War and Class on the Neo-Colonial Terrain* by Butch Lee and Red Rover emphasizes this new phase as capitalism's most contemporary stage.⁶⁶ Ideas of race, gender, or nationality become increasingly obsolete and are essentially "class in drag" due to the neoliberal turn that rendered capital as non-racially oriented⁶⁷. Imperialism was exploitation that was grounded in racial hierarchy, but neo-colonialism discards that framework—it doesn't matter what race you are, what matters is that you belong to an exploitable class in a country that doesn't possess the economic or political power to resist corporate infiltration. However, this opinion does ignore the reality that because of the history of colonial exploitation and the lack of reparatory programs that would ensure the equitable economic development of former colonies, many of the most exploitable people in the laboring class belong to ("formerly") racialized groups. That multi-national corporations don't explicitly employ racialized hiring ideologies does not remove them from the racialized environments that they choose to exploit. What Lee and Rover also highlight is the phenomenon of multi-national power outgrowing the constraints of national affiliation: "...the concentration of capital over national and continental lines is simple: the need for greater

⁶⁵ This hasn't stopped them from invoking national ties to appeal to consumers for the purposes of profit (i.e. "American Made") Lee, Butch, and Red Rover. *Night-Vision: Illuminating War and Class on the Neo-Colonial Terrain*. Vagabond Press, 1993

⁶⁶ Lee, Butch, and Red Rover. *Night-Vision: Illuminating War and Class on the Neo-Colonial Terrain*. Vagabond Press, 1993.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 7

technology, capital, and markets than any one nation possesses.”⁶⁸ Functionally, corporations operate in virtually the same ways that colonial enterprises did, and therefore can be considered modern agents of imperialism.

With all of this in mind, I conclude that capitalists, running out of areas around the globe that they could profit from, understand that the value of their wealth will be adversely affected by limitations imposed by nation-states on who, where, or what they try to exploit. In other words, it’s an apocalypse. How can billionaires continue to amass and protect their extraordinary wealth if that wealth is in danger of disappearing? In a world where Lenin argues that everywhere has been claimed (and sometimes re-distributed), developed, and drained of its economic utility, the conundrum of capitalist expansion becomes this: what do you when you run out of space? Their answer is to look up.

Burgeoning space industries are theoretically infinite, as space is a mysterious and speculative expanse. Ninety five percent of it remains unexplored, presenting a massive opportunity as an *ultimate spatial fix*.⁶⁹ In 2021, scientists discovered two near-Earth asteroids (1986 DA and 2016 ED85) and investigated their mining potential⁷⁰. Both bodies were found to be 85 percent metal, with their reserves potentially exceeding global levels. Space mining is an industry that doesn’t currently exist because of the inability to successfully land on an asteroid

⁶⁸ Ibid., 115

⁶⁹ Shammass, Victor L., and Tomas B. Holen. “Capitalism and Outer Space: Replies to an Interlocutor.” *Dr. Victor Lund Shammass*, 18 Dec. 2019, <https://www.victorshammass.com/blog/2019/12/17/capitalism-and-outer-space>. ; Ibid., 5: “It swallows up surplus capital, promising to deliver valuable resources, techno- logical innovations, and communication services to capitalists back on Earth.”

⁷⁰ Carter, Jamie. “Space Mining: Scientists Discover Two Asteroids Whose Precious Metals Would Exceed Global Reserves.” *Forbes*, 19 Oct. 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiecartereurope/2021/10/19/the-age-of-space-mining-just-got-closer-as-scientists-discover-two-asteroids-whose-precious-metals-would-exceed-global-reserves/?sh=b600fa3713b3>.

and proceed to mine it, but processes of mapping, analyzing, and speculating reflects industries that are being built around potentialities and the commitment to establishing space as a viable economic sphere. But if this story transforms into one not about curiosity and evolution, but of capitalism's ultimate survival, how do you convince people to participate? As one of the primary goals of Space Race 2 is civilian spaceflight, how do you get civilians to care? What emerges is a public relations strategy that spans back into the first Space Race: making the venture a public good.

One Expensive Step for Capitalist—sorry, mankind

Space is devoid of mystery. Again, 95 percent of it remains unexplored, so there's definitely an overwhelming amount of information that human beings don't know about the universe. But the appeal of it appears to be missing in the public consciousness. That's not good for billionaires who need the public's approval to facilitate the creation of these new cosmic industries. Humans haven't found sentient life in the universe, and therefore haven't found sentient life to exploit in any sort of future colonizing mission. That means the most reliable group of potential laborers remains people on Earth—people who do not care about Space Race 2. The rhetoric surrounding this process needs to encourage positive support of these proposed colonizing projects, and to do that, billionaires continually invoke the same humanistic language that allowed Space Race 1 to continue for as long as it did.

The first Space Race wasn't just a contest of ego between two Cold War factions, it was positioned as necessary for the evolution of humanity. The research and innovation required to make Space Race 1 achievable for humankind has been adapted for use across a host of industries, both public and private. Cell phone cameras, GPS systems, home air-purifiers,

satellites, weather forecasting tools, heat resistant material, physically rehabilitative devices—all of these are outgrowths of NASA research and development.⁷¹ Apollo 11’s successful moon landing—and Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the planet were famously “one small step for man, one giant leap for *mankind*.”⁷² This moment was widely considered the end of the Space Race, achieving President John F. Kennedy’s goal established in 1961. But the idea of a person—a nationally affiliated person— or weapon on an unclaimed planet or surveilling the Earth’s orbit illuminated the larger issue behind going deeper into the universe: it was up for grabs. Space could theoretically transform from a public good to a project of unchecked domination for any country that had the means to get up there and start planting flags. International agreements like the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 mitigated that likelihood by demanding that space exploration remained for the benefit of all mankind: that it was free for exploration by all states, that it could not be colonized by a national entity by means of use or occupation, and that nuclear weapons could not be planted on celestial bodies or in orbit.⁷³ These are some of the fundamental frameworks for international space law, enshrining the universe as a space for public benefit.

Space Race 1 was a nationalist project, a metaphor for the future of mankind and an era of speculative cultural expression surrounds the topic. *Star Trek*, one of the most significant

⁷¹ NASA. “Did You Know That’s a NASA Technology?” *YouTube*, YouTube, 4 June 2018, <https://youtu.be/zz2AFNIE-WY>.

⁷² NASA.gov Video. “One Small Step, One Giant Leap.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 15 May 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSdHina-fTk>.
Video of Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the moon during the Apollo Space Mission of July 1969.

⁷³ “United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs.” *Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies.*, <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/introouterspacetreaty.html>. ;
The Outer Space Treaty (created by the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs) is an extension of the previous Declaration of Legal Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space that was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1963.

projects of science fiction and speculative media ever, premiered in 1966—imagining what extraterrestrial social formations (and how humans could interact with them) looked like three years before Neil Armstrong’s team landed on the moon. Parliament Funkadelic started making music in the late 60’s, their mythology emerging both out of a fascination with science fiction but also during what we know as the Space Age. Not seeing Black people in NASA’s work encouraged George Clinton to think about Blackness in the space ways. The curiosity and inspiration people drew from speculation (and that speculation being partially realized) helped justify the government’s monumental expense. The novelty of seeing technological developments that had never been seen before and learning new information about the universe and how it worked had people transfixed. But while the mythos of Space Race 1 was used for political leverage and generated positive press, even that wasn’t enough to keep the American public consistently invested in the project. Public opinion polls in the 60s consistently showed resistance to the Apollo project despite appeals to nationalism and humanism.⁷⁴ The exception was the actual landing in 1969, but that same resistance re-occurred afterwards, marked by the budget reductions NASA faced post-landing and the lack of any serious attempt to land on the moon again in the decades that followed.

Even though the cultural investment and the mythos of national (and even international) unity had a lesser effect on Space Race 1 than what’s currently believed, it was still significant in the way we think about global human progress. Space Race 2 doesn’t have any sort of unifying factor between the public and the capitalists—and the capitalists need it. Mankind isn’t the group going up into space to explore anymore, largely because of the shift from exploration to a

⁷⁴ Nguyen, Terry. “It’s the Dawn of a New Space Age — at Least for Billionaires.” *Vox*, 22 Feb. 2022, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22911159/new-space-age-billionaires-culture>.

heavier focus on commercialization. Space Race 1 represented mankind because of the emphasis its figureheads placed on the benefits for human beings. But capitalism doesn't care about human beings, it cares about profit, and while nation-states funded their space programs and sent their envoys of humanity into the stars in the 60s, it is billionaires who are shuttling themselves and their own representatives into the cosmos today. As national space programs grapple with extraordinary costs to deliver payloads and decreasing funding, they provide contracts and grants to private companies who have in turn developed ways to get into space for less money. The emergence of the reusable rocket remains the most important innovation they tout as the key to becoming a spacefaring civilization. Capitalists have become the stand-ins for humanity as they orient themselves as the only viable way to get into space easily, efficiently, and (comparatively) inexpensively. This, according to Shamma and Holden, marks the emergence of capitalistkind.⁷⁵

One of the major pitfalls of advancements in space exploration is the increasing achievability of these commercial projects. UNOOSA's Outer Space Treaty highlighted the proto-communism of making space a public common, but only so long as the goals within it were feasible, but not guaranteed. The treaty itself is under pressure from commercialization, both from government entities and private corporations like SpaceX and Blue Origin, but also the semi-fraudulent companies that allow people to buy and name celestial bodies and provide documentation of ownership (land deeds and adoption papers) that are "virtually unenforceable and contravened by treaty obligations anyway."⁷⁶ Space itself is becoming a legal site of

⁷⁵ Shamma, Victor L., and Tomas B. Holden. "One Giant Leap for Capitalistkind: Private Enterprise in Outer Space." *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 5, no. 10, 2019.

⁷⁶ Websites like <https://starregister.org/>, <https://cosmonova.org/>, and <https://buyplanets.net/> have been 'selling' the rights to the countless celestial bodies that have been discovered across the universe, benefitting from the fact that nobody can travel to attain it. ; Shamma, Victor L., and Tomas B. Holden. "One Giant Leap for Capitalistkind: Private Enterprise in Outer Space." *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 5, no. 10, 2019. pp 3

contestation that, if successful, capitalistkind could exploit fully. But as a site of legal contestation according to international space law, any sort of colonizing project needs to be reflected as for the benefit of the commons for it to proceed unfettered. This means that private enterprises must conflate capitalism with humanist goals so they can actually become the space cowboys they metaphorically attempt to represent.⁷⁷

To do this, billionaires like Bezos, Branson, and Musk have employed multiple strategies to convince the public that their work is critical to furthering humankind. But as mentioned earlier, they have none of what made Space Race 1 successful from a public relations standpoint. The sense of wonder that spurred on a period of space-oriented cultural expression—or futurism—isn't there. In a Pew Research Poll in 2018, researchers found that the public was evenly divided on the prospect of space tourism, but that the majority thought that NASA should prioritize research and assessment (monitoring the Earth's atmosphere for asteroids and debris) over manned space missions.⁷⁸ While scientists make groundbreaking discoveries on the nature of the universe frequently, the public interest has waned. Space mining and space colonialism are far flung prospects and while seeing the first human being step onto the moon was an exciting cultural and historical moment, that's not a moment that can be easily topped. Other planets are too far and too inhospitable to safely land on next, and the extreme price tag to go on these leisure activities despite the many issues on Earth emphasizes the stark separation of humankind from capitalistkind. That hasn't stopped billionaires from trying, though.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 4

⁷⁸ Nguyen, Terry. "It's the Dawn of a New Space Age — at Least for Billionaires." *Vox*, 22 Feb. 2022, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22911159/new-space-age-billionaires-culture>.

Rhetorically, Bezos, Branson, and Musk—not the only private individuals involved in commercializing space, but the most public facing—regularly use emotional appeals to convince the public that their work is for the benefit of everyone instead of just themselves. Branson took the philosophical route and used the explanation that would produce the least amount of resistance: curiosity. On Virgin Galactic’s website, the argument presented is that when looking at Earth from an orbital perspective, an internal shift happens, one that will encourage innovation and “benefits to life on our beautiful planet”.⁷⁹ Making space accessible to the public is not a moneymaking scheme that charges upwards of \$200,000 a ticket, but a pathway to a renaissance of human thought. Branson’s appeal to *our* planet reminds the prospective buyer that at a fundamental level, he is human too, and as a member of humankind and capitalistkind, he promises that everyone will be more curious about the cosmos the closer they can get to them. Of course, this appeal to shared humanity disregards the monumental gap in wealth and what Branson gains monetarily from being as convincing in his appeal as possible.

Bezos and Musk’s arguments extend further. While Branson’s work isn’t centered on a colonial project, the other two’s projects are and therefore must mitigate the potential legal challenges of the Space Treaty. This isn’t a question of new industries, but a larger question of ownership. Their entreaties revolve around the evolution of human progress and the apocalyptic potential of human civilization if it doesn’t pursue interplanetary status. Bezos positions his childhood dreams of exploring the universe as his ultimate goal, with Blue Origin being the culmination of that ambition—and all of it happening because of his work at Amazon. Instead of a billionaire infamous for the substandard working conditions his employees must face in

⁷⁹ “Home: Virgin Galactic.” *Home | Virgin Galactic*, Virgin Galactix, <https://www.virgingalactic.com/#landing-curious>.

Amazon warehouses, he is a visionary with a childhood aspiration who simply worked hard enough to see that dream realized. Not only this, but his vision is not just for the benefit of himself, but his cowboy hat-toting cosmic-manifest destiny is for everyone because his visions of human progress (if it remains Earth-bound) are ones of stagnation. “I’m pursuing this work, because I believe if we don’t, we will eventually end up with a civilization of stasis, which I find very demoralizing. I don’t want my great-grandchildren’s great-grandchildren to live in a civilization of stasis,” Bezos says.⁸⁰ Humankind becomes synonymous with progress, and if a society who defines itself around the idea of moving forward stops moving, then humanity stops being human. It’s a post-historical framing of the future of the world, where the historical record stops if humankind stops, and the only way to provide a new era of civilization not just for us, but our future families (and therefore a new era worth recording) is through cosmic colonialism.

Musk’s arguments range from personal ambition to a greater appeal for the fate of humankind—one fate he predicts using speculation. While Musk wasn’t the first billionaire to make it to space (orbital or suborbital), he wants to be the first one on Mars. More than that, he wants to be one of the first people to die there. “I will go if I can be assured that SpaceX would go on without me...I’ve said I want to die on Mars, just not on impact.”⁸¹ A self-sustaining colony of a million, he argues, would take 40 to 60 years to fully develop with him at the helm. The alternative to this critical first step would be leaving humankind vulnerable to potential disaster. During a 2016 presentation on making humanity a multiplanetary species, Musk explained that staying on Earth risks “an eventual extinction event” if it doesn’t pursue a

⁸⁰ Clifford, Catherine. “Jeff Bezos Dreams of a World with a Trillion People Living in Space.” *CNBC*, 1 May 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/01/jeff-bezos-dreams-of-a-world-with-a-trillion-people-living-in-space.html>.

⁸¹ Tiffany, Kaitlyn. “Elon Musk Thinks He’ll Die on Mars: The Good News Is You Can’t Afford to Do the Same.” *Vox*, 2 Nov. 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/11/2/18053824/elon-musk-death-mars-spacex-kara-swisher-interview>.

colonizing strategy.⁸² Forget that he provides no evidence of any such event (imminent or eventual), it is the possibility (no matter how remote) that engenders urgency around the topic. What could be more beneficial to humanity if not ensuring their continued existence?

The “it’s about *us*” versus “it’s about *me*” strategy is necessary because these men cannot serve as mascots for humankind. They remain deeply unpopular because of the exposure their businesses practices receive. Their ultra-wealth is something that can only be attained through the exploitation of the working class, and therefore the inequitable distribution of that capital. Regular stories of poor and unethical working conditions reflect that reality. Over the years, Amazon, the second largest employer in the U.S, has invested millions of dollars in their union-busting efforts, which failed when the Staten Island warehouse voted to create a union—the first in the company’s history--in April 2022. While celebrating the historic win (that Amazon proceeded to legally challenge less than a week later), labor organizer Christian Smalls mentioned Jeff Bezos. “We want to thank Jeff Bezos for going to space, because when he was up there, we was signing people up,” Smalls said. “We were out here getting signatures.”⁸³ Despite not being the CEO of the company anymore, the call-out reflected the reality of what Space Race 2 means for working class people on Earth: a distraction for the world’s richest people that has little to do with the day-to-day realities of almost everyone else, realities that these companies are directly responsible for shaping.

⁸²SpaceX. “Making Humans a Multiplanetary Species - Youtube.” *Youtube*, 27 Sept. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7Uyfqj_TE8.

⁸³ Associated Press In New York. “Amazon Fights to Overturn Union’s Historic Win at New York Warehouse.” *The Guardian*, 9 Apr. 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/apr/09/amazon-new-york-warehouse-union-victory-nlrb>. ;
Bienasz, Gabrielle. “Amazon Labor Organizer Popped Champagne and Thanked Jeff Bezos for Going to Space: ‘When He Was up There, We Was Signing People Up.’” *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/amazons-labor-organizer-popped-champagne-thanked-bezos-2022-4>.

Musk shapes working class realities in a different way—by racially segregating them. In February 2022, the state of California sued Tesla for operating a “racially segregated workplace” at one of its factories in Fremont. Following up on hundreds of complaints from workers, the Department of Fair Employment and Housing found that Black employees “are subjected to racial slurs and discriminated against in job assignments, discipline, pay, and promotion creating a hostile work environment,” which Tesla called “misguided” in a blog post.⁸⁴ In the post, Tesla also claimed that it would be asking the court to pause the case to ensure “facts and evidence will be heard.” Some of that evidence includes that this suit comes after Tesla was made to pay \$137 million in damages to a Black employee who had endured racial abuse at the same factory in 2021. This is irrelevant though, because the real problem, Tesla argues, is that a department with prosecutorial power is “attacking a company like Tesla that has done *so much good* for California.” What are a few people being abused if it means the greater world benefits? The same logic applied to rhetoric surrounding Space Race 2 is what is generally applied to justify the exploitation and abuse of the workers that made these billionaires rich enough to leave Earth’s orbit in the first place. Even the books written about the role of these billionaires in space can’t evade these characterizations. While Christian Davenport’s book looks upon the work of Musk and Bezos favorably, propping “Bezos and Musk up as greats, as if they and only they are the cause of their vast wealth and corporate empire” and accepting “the oligarchic and feudal future space may have” it’s ironic that its name connotes otherwise: *The Space Barons: Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and the Quest to Colonize the Cosmos* forgets that the last batch of barons in

⁸⁴ Neate, Rupert. “California Sues Tesla over ‘Racial Segregation’ Claims at Factory.” *The Guardian*, 10 Feb. 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/feb/10/california-sues-tesla-over-racial-segregation-claims-at-factory>. ; The Tesla Team. *The DFEH’s Misguided Lawsuit*. 9 Feb. 2022, <https://www.tesla.com/blog/dfehs-misguided-lawsuit>.

U.S. history happened to be robbers that engaged in the exact same unethical behavior that Musk and Bezos' companies have been accused of.⁸⁵

It's clear that even if people like Musk and Bezos try to appeal to the greater masses, their reputations remain tarnished by the nature of their anti-working-class and racist business practices. Their notoriety inhibits their ability to shape public opinion in their favor. Lenin argues that capitalists take advantage of their wealth to buy up the press to create a beneficial representation of public opinion. "All over the world, wherever there are capitalists, freedom of the press means freedom to buy up newspapers, to buy writers, to bribe, buy and fake "public opinion" for the benefit of the bourgeoisie."⁸⁶ In fact, media ownership has escalated to a status symbol for the ultra- rich. Bezos bought the Washington Post in 2013, and in April 2022, Elon Musk took a 9.2 percent stake in Twitter—becoming its largest shareholder—and a week later offered roughly 40 billion to buy the entire company.⁸⁷ The opportunity Bezos (and if he acquires Twitter, Musk) has in being able to misrepresent the public opinion to suit his own ends is immense, drawing into question the nature of how “free speech” and honest reporting operate in companies owned by capitalists with conflicting interests.

⁸⁵ Tarrant, Jack. "The Space Barons: Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and the Quest to Colonize the Cosmos." *Chemistry World*, 13 July 2018, <https://www.chemistryworld.com/review/the-space-barons-elon-musk-jeff-bezos-and-the-quest-to-colonize-the-cosmos/3009196.article>. ;
The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Robber Barons." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 20 July 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/robber-baron>.

⁸⁶ Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. *Revolution!: Sayings of Vladimir Lenin*. Edited by The Bodleian Library, The University of Chicago Press.

⁸⁷ Farhi, Paul. "Washington Post to Be Sold to Jeff Bezos, the Founder of Amazon." *The Washington Post*, 5 Aug. 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/washington-post-to-be-sold-to-jeff-bezos/2013/08/05/ca537c9e-fe0c-11e2-9711-3708310f6f4d_story.html. ;
Dearbail, Jordan. "Elon Musk Offers to Buy Twitter." *BBC*, 15 Apr. 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61104231#:~:text=In%20a%20surprise%20announcement%2C%20Mr,large%20stake%20in%20the%20firm>.

Moves to represent themselves as down to Earth have largely failed, and therefore require alternative strategies. For example, Musk himself has come to resist being called a billionaire because of the negative connotation associated with it, claiming it a false label used to denigrate the subject as opposed to the reality, which is that he is worth at least a billion dollars.⁸⁸ This is due to the massive amount of criticism and scrutiny he's experienced on the Twitter platform. There's no mystery to Musk as a person when he is habitually very vocal and uninclined to fact-check his tweets. The public can engage with him and subsequently attempt to hold his behavior and his company practices to account. With the odds stacked against them to sway the public themselves, there needs to be an individual or group of people that can bridge the social gap between billionaires and the working class. Enter Pete Davidson and 'cool capitalism'.

Billionaires, They're Just Like Us!

In March 2022, Blue Origin announced that Pete Davidson would be the latest celebrity guest to go to space on its rocket. This decision was met with a host of responses, ranging from shock to confusion. The benefit for Blue Origin was that as a result, people were talking about the company. But why Pete?

Davidson is tall, tattooed, and irreverent. He's a comedian who rose to prominence on MTV and became a writer on Saturday Night Live. He's open about dealing with his chronic illness, Chron's disease, and confuses the masses with his string of high-profile romantic partners ranging from actresses to supermodels. The public debates whether he's funny or not, charismatic or not, a heartthrob or not—whether in favor or against, Davidson is constantly being

⁸⁸ Musk, Elon [@elonmusk] "Ironically, the "billionaire" label, when used by media, is almost always meant to devalue & denigrate the subject. I wasn't called that until my companies got to a certain size, but reality is that I still do the same science & engineering as before. Just the scale has changed." *Twitter*. 10 July 2018. https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1016695490438619136?s=20&t=kxA6kUX_UVrEXGuAmiZCmA

mentioned in popular culture, and that's what makes him perfect for Jeff Bezos. Pete Davidson isn't polished or highbrow and he regularly appears in baggy clothing. While he's often in the presence of celebrities, something about him feels 'normal.' He straddles a strange middle ground in which he's fully capable of interacting with high profile figures as well as everyday people. The key example? Pete Davidson is currently dating a billionaire.⁸⁹

Space itself isn't the only draw for people; it's the spectacle behind it. Pete Davidson dating billionaire Kim Kardashian resulted in the public eye being glued to him, wanting to know his every move. Davidson's proximity to both the public and to other billionaires is the metaphorical bridge between the two groups, the one Bezos and Musk need to figure out how to cross. Pete Davidson's (free) flight on Blue Origin would have been an endorsement for non-billionaires to embrace space tourism, for his civilian fanbase to engage with the idea of making the venture and to make Jeff Bezos, for lack of a better term, 'cool.' Celebrities that possess the same social capital as Davidson help legitimize the projects they represent, and if billionaires like Musk and Bezos can't be normal, relatable people, then Davidson must do it instead. He becomes "the dream of humanity boldly venturing forth into the dark unknown, thereby also providing the legitimacy and enthusiasm needed" for colonial enterprise.⁹⁰ But Davidson was all potential, because later that same month, Blue Origin announced that he would no longer be on the 20th launch of the New Shepard rocket.⁹¹ Davidson, however, isn't the only attempt that's been made to make capitalism look cool.

⁸⁹ Miller, Brittany. "Kim Kardashian and Pete Davidson: A Complete Timeline of Their Relationship." *PageSix*, 3 Mar. 2022, <https://pagesix.com/article/kim-kardashian-pete-davidson-dating-history-relationship-timeline/>.

⁹⁰ Shamas, Victor L., and Tomas B. Holen. "One Giant Leap for Capitalistkind: Private Enterprise in Outer Space." *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 5, no. 10, 2019.

⁹¹ Levitt, Ross. "SNL Star Pete Davidson Will No Longer Fly to Space after Launch Postponed." *CNN*, 18 Mar. 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/18/tech/pete-davidson-snl-blue-origin/index.html>.

‘Cool capitalism’ cares about individualism and nonconformity.⁹² Its logics hinge on the appeal of capitalism as a means of satisfying your individual whims while it disengages itself from the necessary exploitation of labor. This is an illusion, because that exploitation always exists, but the public is so seduced by their ability to consume and the semantic meaning of that consumption (it’s not just *stuff*, its *creative self-representation*) that they can ignore the inequities necessary to produce the commodity. For this, the geographic separation of producers and consumers is necessary because with cool capitalism, if it’s out of sight, it’s out of mind. Capitalism being made “cool” becomes an aspirational message for people engaging with it. It adopts progressive ideas like anti-elitism and populism to convince people that the only way to be that new person is to aspire towards a greater degree of wealth. The likelihood that a person will achieve that wealth is diminishing in real time as the wage gap continues to widen—and the scam is revealed.

Those same logics are being employed as a strategy by Bezos and Musk. They aren’t part of the capitalist institution, not really—they’re innovators, countercultural icons, maybe even revolutionaries. They’re trying to save the environment, something that capitalism has had a direct hand in devastating on a global scale. The people embarking on these flights (including celebrities like William Shatner who played the original Captain Kirk in *Star Trek*, Laura Shepard Churchly, the daughter of America’s first astronaut Alan Shepard, and pioneering Aviator Wally Funk of the all-women “Mercury-13” team) hold tremendous cultural capital to the public, and that can be mobilized to shape public opinion for the missions themselves if not

⁹² Pountain, Dick. “Cool Capitalism: Changing the Principles of Protest.” *OpenDemocracy*, 25 July 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/cool-capitalism-changing-principles-of-protest/>.

for the people responsible.⁹³ After all, how much does it really matter if Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk don't win the popularity contest if they'll continue to generate enormous profit so long as their ambitions are supported? Musk seems to have employed that idea in marketing SpaceX. To celebrate the test flight of the company's rocket, the Falcon Heavy, the event was livestreamed on YouTube (becoming the 2nd most watched livestream ever on the platform at the time with 2.3 million concurrent views) while David Bowie's 'Space Oddity' played in the background and "in-jokes were made referencing Douglas Adam's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*."⁹⁴ This massive marketing stunt was made to engage and entertain the people watching while Musk beckoned in the age of capitalistkind in space. This flight's dummy load was a Tesla roadster, which carries another message. Musk can't plant a flag on a planet or make any sort of definitive claim of ownership at this moment, but by letting a Tesla drift across the solar system—undriveable, and with virtually no utility whatsoever—Musk makes his mark. The floating hunk of metal is a semi-permanent fixture that informs the world that Musk and his company represent progress, and all those that support this endeavor are as 'cool' as he is. But, just like the illusion of 'cool capitalism,' the reality of this colonial endeavor remains riddled with ironies, inconsistencies, and outright skepticism.

A Space Polluter's Guide to the Galaxy (sponsored by the Tesla Roadster)

⁹³ Wattles, Jackie. "William Shatner Is Now the Oldest Person to Ever Go to Space: 'The Most Profound Experience.'" *CNN*, 13 Oct. 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/13/tech/william-shatner-space-blue-origin-everything-you-need-to-know-scn/index.html>. ;

Gohd, Chelsea. "Wally Funk to Break John Glenn's Spaceflight Record with Blue Origin Flight." *Space.com*, 6 July 2021, <https://www.space.com/blue-origin-wally-funk-will-break-record-oldest-astronaut>.

⁹⁴ Shammas, Victor L., and Tomas B. Holen. "One Giant Leap for Capitalistkind: Private Enterprise in Outer Space." *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 5, no. 10, 2019.

For all the attempts to present Space Race 2's colonizing enterprise as the inevitable next step for humankind, there's been ample amount of criticism about the ironies of the arguments being made in its favor and even the feasibility of the project itself. One of the primary justifications for pursuing space colonialism is the environmental degradation happening on Earth. To make space more accessible for everyone, space flight must be less expensive and more efficient. The solution to that was the creation of reusable rockets. Both Musk and Bezos aim for entire rockets to be made of components with as many sustainable elements as possible. SpaceX's Falcon9 became the first successfully landed re-usable rocket in 2015 and has since built a reusable first-stage booster. The company aims for 100% reusability in its subsequent rockets. Bezos' planned orbital ship, the New Glenn, is being built with similar sustainability standards in mind. As mentioned earlier, both capitalists have appealed to fear about the impacts of climate change and the survival of humanity, making the claim to space-faring an environmental one. Blue Origins' vision statement emphasizes that "In order to preserve Earth, Blue Origin believes that humanity will need to expand, explore, find new energy and material resources, and move industries that stress Earth into space," a call to the increasingly volatile climate conditions affecting ecologies around the world.⁹⁵ Ideally, polluting industries would migrate into space, preserving the life-sustaining conditions on Earth for longer.

But none of these justifications account for the hypocrisy they're riddled with. Bezos has been criticized repeatedly for the environmental impact of Amazon's business practices. The massive corporation released over 44 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 2018, and despite signing the 'Climate Pledge' in 2019, released 15 percent *more* CO2 that same year (51 million

⁹⁵ Bender, Bryan. "'A Much Grander Human Destiny': For Jeff Bezos, Space Travel Is About More than Tourism." *Politico*, 20 July 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/20/jeff-bezos-space-travel-philosophy-500300>.

metric tons).⁹⁶ He also bought a stadium in Seattle and named it the Climate Pledge Arena “to remind people of the urgent need for climate action,” apparently while they watch their favorite artist at a concert.⁹⁷ Upon his resignation as CEO, Bezos created the Earth Fund, a 10-billion-dollar fund (he called it one of his “passions”—whether he meant spending money or the caring for the environment, it’s unsure. The assumption is the former.) that would give grants to scientists, activists, and NGOs that are committed to climate change. However, this fund has come under fire because “the majority of his grants went to larger organizations with less diverse leadership”. Smaller, grassroots groups representing communities of color say they’ve been left out,” and none of the funding has gone to improve the conditions of the neighborhoods directly impacted from their proximity to Amazon’s warehouses.⁹⁸ While Bezos’ wealth increases and he and Amazon claim to improve their environmental record, they have patently failed to mitigate the impact of corporate pollution on the poor communities most affected. In short, it’s a cop-out. None of Bezos’ investments in his first round of funding allocation has been directed at organizations demanding the cessation of the use of fossil fuels entirely. Instead, Amazon continues to impact the health and wellbeing of its workers and the surrounding population while its profits continue to skyrocket—and Bezos has thanked them for it.

The wealth of Jeff Bezos and Amazon has exponentially increased since 2020—Bezos’ net worth rose by 70 billion that year and has continued to increase since. When the resident space cowboy touched down on the inaugural Blue Origin flight, cowboy hat in hand, he thanked

⁹⁶ The Climate Pledge commits its signees to becoming carbon neutral by 2040.

⁹⁷ “Climate Pledge Arena.” <https://climatepledgearena.com/>

⁹⁸ Calma, Justine. “BEZOS’ CLIMATE FUND FACES A RECKONING WITH AMAZON’S POLLUTION.” *The Verge*, 4 Feb. 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/2/4/22266225/jeff-bezos-climate-change-earth-fund-amazon-pollution>

“every Amazon employee and every Amazon customer, because you guys paid for all this.”⁹⁹

While the intent was likely to metaphorically include consumers and the working class in this new venture or to make Bezos seem more ‘down to Earth’ so to speak, it resulted in widespread criticism, especially from his own workforce. Employees called out the inhumane conditions, lack of benefits, rampant union-busting practices, and low pay as the human cost to Bezos’ wealth and subsequent space endeavor. His flight quickly transformed from a victory of entrepreneurship into a shining example of wealth and ego. Democratic Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez tweeted “Yes, Amazon workers did pay for this - with lower wages, union busting, a frenzied and inhumane workplace, and delivery drivers not having health insurance during a pandemic. And Amazon customers are paying for it with Amazon abusing their market power to hurt small business,” which is true.¹⁰⁰ Bezos has said he is willing to fund Blue Origin with up to \$1 billion dollars a year through his equity in Amazon as the founder and executive chairman, meaning that while there aren’t life forms to exploit in the cosmos, this colonizing mission is still reliant on the abuse of working-class people and environmental destruction.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Spocchia, Gino. “Jeff Bezos Criticised by Amazon Workers and Customers after Thanking Them for Funding Space Launch.” *The Independent*, 28 July 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/amazon-workers-slam-jeff-bezos-b1887944.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandra [@AOC] “Yes, Amazon workers did pay for this - with lower wages, union busting, a frenzied and inhumane workplace, and delivery drivers not having health insurance during a pandemic. And Amazon customers are paying for it with Amazon abusing their market power to hurt small business.” *Twitter*. 20 July 2021.
[https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1417539221326336002?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1417539221326336002%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1 &ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fd-19278896713241100607.ampproject.net%2F2203172113000%2Fframe.html](https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1417539221326336002?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1417539221326336002%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fd-19278896713241100607.ampproject.net%2F2203172113000%2Fframe.html)

¹⁰¹ Döpfner, Mathias. “Jeff Bezos Reveals What It’s like to Build an Empire — and Why He’s Willing to Spend \$1 Billion a Year to Fund the Most Important Mission of His Life.” *Insider*, 28 Apr. 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/jeff-bezos-interview-axel-springer-ceo-amazon-trump-blue-origin-family-regulation-washington-post-2018-4>.

Musk, on the other hand, has limited his appeals concerning the ecological conditions on Earth, but they aren't absent of the ironies of the sustainability argument. The employment of his reusable rocket—again, which was created to mitigate the costs and environmental impact of repeatedly building new ones—to have a Tesla float around the galaxy is ridiculous. Especially because the increasing number of items floating around the atmosphere puts people on Earth at risk. Since Space Race 1, thousands of satellites have been launched into orbit, with about 3,000 'dead' ones floating around the galaxy and 2,000 'live' ones orbiting the Earth. This doesn't account for the tens of thousands of pieces of debris (Tesla roadster included) larger than 10cm and millions of smaller pieces also littering the space ways. This debris poses the risk of colliding with other satellites and the Earth, especially as the density of objects in orbit increases.¹⁰² Both SpaceX and Amazon plan on launching massive groups of satellites (called mega constellations) into orbit to eventually beam internet access down to Earth, another commercial industry to take fuller advantage of this ultimate spatial fix.¹⁰³ In other words, Musk's space junk—and all the rest of it—might be bad for the global environment and the people living within it.

Another critique of Space Race 2 stems from its feasibility. Colonizing space is an ambitious project, one that requires technology that doesn't exist yet. But this quote from Vox reporter Kaitlyn Tiffany highlights just how far from Mars we really are:

¹⁰² O' Callaghan, Jonathan. "SpaceX's Starlink Could Cause Cascades of Space Junk." *Scientific American*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/spacexs-starlink-could-cause-cascades-of-space-junk/>.

¹⁰³ O'Callaghan, Jonathan. "What Is Space Junk and Why Is It a Problem?" *Natural History Museum*, <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/what-is-space-junk-and-why-is-it-a-problem.html>. ; Musk has openly voiced that Starlink (the name of his planned satellite launch) is meant to increase the profitability of SpaceX in order to further finance his planned Mars colony. de Selding, Peter B. "SpaceX To Build 4,000 Broadband Satellites in Seattle." *Space News*, 9 Jan. 2015, <https://spacenews.com/spacex-opening-seattle-plant-to-build-4000-broadband-satellites/>.

“The first and biggest is that, so far, there is no plan in place to protect Mars voyagers from dying of radiation before they even get there; nor do we really even know very much about what it would entail to keep all the muscles inside a typical human body from atrophying over the course of an 80-day trip in zero gravity.

There is no plan for what the housing on Mars would look like, or what, say, would happen to an embryo if it gestated entirely in one-third gravity. We have no idea what kind of cross-contamination would result from swapping microbes between Mars and Earth, and we also don’t know if Musk is still planning to artificially raise the temperature on Mars and give it a thicker atmosphere to allow the flow of water. (At the 2016 press conference, he said he would leave many of these questions “up to the decision of the people on Mars.”)¹⁰⁴

Not only does the technology not exist to sustain life, but it also doesn’t exist to account for the disparate health effects that occur from space travel and life on an incredibly inhospitable planet. Bezos, whose strategy includes colonies that float through the cosmos—massive space stations—similarly don’t account for the massive expense and implausibility of being able to build them. They can’t be launched because of their proposed size and therefore must be built in space, which comes with its own plethora of logistical issues. With all of this in mind, it’s not hard to see why critics think that these billionaire ambitions seem like an extraordinary exercise in ego instead of a legitimate business venture. And of course, that business venture prioritizes its own ambitions over the wellbeing of its employees.

¹⁰⁴ Tiffany, Kaitlyn. “Elon Musk Thinks He’ll Die on Mars: The Good News Is You Can’t Afford to Do the Same.” *Vox*, 2 Nov. 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/11/2/18053824/elon-musk-death-mars-spacex-kara-swisher-interview>.

It's hard to build a case against space colonialism on the basis of personhood if only because colonialism in global history was reliant on racial capitalism. There are no people or entities to racialize and subjugate in space that we know of. But that doesn't mean that someone won't be exploited—after all, getting to space requires a massive amount of manpower, and just because Bezos is no longer the CEO of Amazon doesn't mean a billionaire can change their methods.

In September of 2021, a group of current and former Blue Origin employees published an open letter alleging that Bezos had fostered a workplace culture rife with sexism and toxicity, and that they believed that the company had sacrificed safety concerns (a team in 2018 had documented more than 1,000 concerns that were ignored) in the name of speeding up the development of their rocket, to the extent that many of them wouldn't feel safe flying in the New Shepard. It begs the question of whether the wealthiest people (and the ones most prone to abusing others with less power) are the ones that should get to determine the future of humanity. "If this company's culture and work environment are a template for the future Jeff Bezos envisions, we are headed in a direction that reflects the worst of the world we live in now, and sorely needs to change," said the letter.¹⁰⁵ After all, like with the environment, these billionaires have the money to change the material conditions of a world filled people that sorely need access to resources so that they can survive, and yet they do nothing. Elon Musk, facing increasing criticism for his wealth, once tweeted that he would fund the UN's World Food Program if it came up with an actionable plan to help end World Hunger—and when the organization

¹⁰⁵ Baker, Sinéad, and Grace Kay. "Open Letter from Former and Current Blue Origin Employees Accuses Jeff Bezos of Sacrificing Safety in an Effort to Win the Billionaire Space Race — and Creating a Toxic, Sexist Work Culture along the Way." *Insider*, 30 Sept. 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/blue-origin-employee-accuse-company-sacrificing-safety-2021-9#:~:text=An%20open%20letter%20says%20former,maintains%20its%20rockets%20are%20safe.>

provided that plan, Musk failed to give them any funding for it. Instead, he made a donation of 5.7 billion dollars to an undisclosed charity.¹⁰⁶ Jeff Bezos, the wealthiest man in the world, is repeatedly cited for only donating miniscule amounts of his massive net worth. Repeatedly, we see billionaires either refuse to show empathy for the local, regional, and global communities around them or provide charitable donations not for the sake of an actual humanistic effort to help mankind as a whole, but as a means to improve their own reputation. It's exemplified by their resistance to the regulation of their companies, from taxation (that sustains social services programming), or their tireless efforts to disrupt labor organizing. Why should anybody care about the intergalactic ambitions of people whose primary characteristics include growing their wealth and exploiting people do it? Not to mention that for all the arguments these capitalists make about the public accessing the cosmos, they aren't making these flights with the general public in mind. The list of people signed up for future flights with any of these space tourism companies are people who either have an immense amount of social capital or an immense amount of money. Bezos refuses to disclose the current cost of his flights, but riders have included millionaire CEOs of private equity firms (or their sons), and the auctioned price of a seat on Blue Origin's first crewed mission was 28 million dollars. Virgin Galactic's suborbital flights are currently priced at 450,000 dollars, so it's safe to assume that Bezos and Musk are charging more.¹⁰⁷ According to the 2020 census, the median household income in the United States is 67,521 dollars, far below even just the 150,000-dollar deposit necessary to book a flight

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, Amiah. "Elon Musk Gave a Mysterious \$5.7 Billion Donation Weeks after He Dared the UN to Show Him Its Plan for Solving World Hunger." *Fortune*, 15 Feb. 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/02/15/elon-musk-5-7-billion-donation-weeks-after-asking-un-world-hunger/#:~:text=Elon%20Musk%20donated%20around%20%245.74,right%20now%20and%20do%20it.%E2%80%9D>.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas, Daniel. "Virgin Galactic Space Flight Tickets to Start at \$450,000." *BBC*, 6 Aug. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58120009>.

on Virgin Galactic.¹⁰⁸ So, knowing that most people can't even afford the cost of a flight in their lifetime, why should they be bothered with Space Race 2 at all? Moreover, why should anybody care about the colonial ambitions of people who, according to the UN, aren't even allowed to attempt them?

Article VI of the UN's Outer Space Treaty dictates that all space-oriented activities conducted by non-governmental entities must be authorized by their respective States to ensure compliance with the stipulations of the Treaty.¹⁰⁹ Musk, Bezos, Branson, Boeing, Axios—all of these billionaires and the companies that either receive grants from the government for launches, payload deliveries, research and/or are engaging in commercial space tourism are subject to authorization and supervision by the United States. The United States, as a member of the treaty is not allowed to engage in space colonialism, which means the parties under the supervision of the member State are similarly prohibited. In other words, for as much as Musk and Bezos dream about their proprietary colonies amongst the stars, any actual attempt to establish these colonies will immediately conflict with the UNOOSA's terms. That would be enough to stop them if it weren't for the UN's increasing orientation towards commercializing space. While the language of the public good remains enshrined in the Treaty and forms the basis for international space law, those terms are subject to amendment under the right pressures—or the individual member states' own interests. In 2017, the United States House of Representatives introduced the American Space Commerce Free Enterprise Act, which declared that 'space is not a global

¹⁰⁸ Shrider, Emily A., et al. "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2020." *United States Census Bureau*, vol. Report Number P60-273, Sept. 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html#:~:text=Median%20household%20income%20was%20%2467%2C521,and%20Table%20A%2D1>.

¹⁰⁹ "2222 (XXI). Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies." *United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs*, 19 Dec. 1966, <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/outerspacetreaty.html#:~:text=Article%20VI&text=The%20activities%20of%20non%2Dgovernmental,State%20Party%20to%20the%20Treaty>.

commons' and the executive director of the National Space Council at the time publicly reiterated this, claiming that "outer space is not...the 'common heritage' of mankind, not 'res communis', nor is it a public good."¹¹⁰ This movement by the Trump administration and its supporters attempts to establish space as a site of private enterprise—a private good—with no responsibility to the global public, therefore paving the way for colonial pursuits by capitalists like Bezos and Musk. The characterization of space as a public good in the 1960s was strengthened by the inaccessibility of it as a resource, but with rapid technological innovation, the potential economic benefits appear to be within reach and so that foundational attribute begins to fracture under the pressure of capital interests. But that support is another ironic twist to Space Race 2. Capitalistkind wants to present itself as exceeding the power of the state, but their ability to venture into space is financially determined by large government contracts that these companies fight over. Musk has repeatedly criticized the role of government regulations on corporate activity and subsidies, and yet his companies have received billions of dollars over the last two decades. As recently as April of 2021, SpaceX had received a 2.89-billion-dollar contract from the federal government to work on commercial moon landings.¹¹¹ Blue Origin on the other hand just won a 130 million dollar contract from NASA for their design plan to build a commercial space station (conceptualized as "an expandable business park") called the Orbital Reef.¹¹² Whether capitalists like it or not, they're as reliant on government funding to run their

¹¹⁰ Shammas, Victor L., and Tomas B. Holen. "One Giant Leap for Capitalistkind: Private Enterprise in Outer Space." *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 5, no. 10, 2019. Pg 2

¹¹¹ Lalljee, Jason. "Elon Musk Is Speaking out against Government Subsidies. Here's a List of the Billions of Dollars His Businesses Have Received." *Business Insider*, 15 Dec. 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-list-government-subsidies-tesla-billions-spacex-solarcity-2021-12#spacex-lands-a-289-billion-contract-with-nasa-in-april-2021-1>.

¹¹² Boyle, Alan. "Blue Origin's Team Wins a \$130M Share of NASA Funding for Commercial Space Stations." *GeekWire*, 2 Dec. 2021, <https://www.geekwire.com/2021/blue-origins-team-wins-a-130m-share-of-nasa-funding->

programs as the government is on these capitalists to cut the costs of their research and development. The stance that they can do it *better* than the government isn't enough to counteract the reality that they can't do it better than the government can *without* the government.

From what can be seen, space colonialism is a practice in ego and escapism. It's currently technologically inaccessible, it's unaffordable to most of the people in the United States (let alone on Earth), it's being employed as a far-flung solution to the environmental problems that these capitalists and the companies they own are directly contributing to or could solve with relative immediacy, and it, lacking any labor to exploit from extraterrestrial life, will continue to rely on the exploitation of working class people from Earth. Space colonialism will never be an evolution in the history of humanity, but an evolution in the scope of capitalist expansion—which makes the final critique the greatest ironic twist so far.

In October of 2021, Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge and heir to the royal throne of the United Kingdom (formerly the British *Empire*) went on the BBC Network to talk about his “Earthshot” competition for combating climate change. In it, he noted the need for the Earth’s brightest minds to focus on repairing the planet, not looking for a new habitat. “I think that ultimately is what sold it for me - that really is quite crucial to be focusing on this [planet] rather than giving up and heading out into space to try and think of solutions for the future.”¹¹³ While the point he makes is valid—the amount invested into these space tourism initiatives could easily go into programs that would help counteract the impacts of climate change—the audacity of the

[for-commercial-space-stations/#:~:text=Jeff%20Bezos'%20Blue%20Origin%20space,of%20the%20International%20Space%20Station.](#)

¹¹³ Bowden, George. “Prince William: Saving Earth Should Come before Space Tourism.” *BBC*, 14 Oct. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-58903078>.

heir to a former empire that still counts 14 British Overseas Territories (a nicer term for colonies) amongst its holdings to criticize another colonial project is astonishing. There is no moral authority between one of the largest seats of imperial power in global history—one that resulted in the disruption of countless ecosystems in the conquest for capital—and the billionaires that seek to do virtually the same thing in the space ways. It has the overall effect of someone scolding their own reflection in a mirror. Where is humankind in all of this? What does it mean to allegedly have the universe at our fingertips, but only if we're willing to deal with an accelerated and economic model that won't stop until it does the impossible and consumes the infinite? Afrofuturism can't predict the future, but its proponents do use common sense. This is a cautionary tale hundreds of years in the making: if something is bad, and you let it continue, it could always become catastrophically worse. So how on Earth can it be mitigated?

Chapter 3:

A World That Works Differently

“Science fiction isn’t just thinking about the world out there. It’s also thinking about how that world might be—a particularly important exercise for those who are oppressed, because if they’re going to change the world we live in, they—and all of us—have to be able to think about a world that works differently.”

-Samuel R. Delany, The Art of Fiction No. 210

Whiteness is defined by its closer proximity to access, representation, and acceptance. Frameworks of epistemic oppression establish that the people with the most social capital are the ones with the best ability to determine how knowledge is produced. The less social capital someone possesses, the further away they are from being an accepted or credible contributor to these systems of knowledge production. This theory is defined by the way power orients itself to determine what it considers the truth or the status quo, and that has lasting implications on the world these knowledge systems are implemented in. Colonially, the enforcement of Western epistemologies made sacred and occupied lands a “resource” to be seized and exploited, justified the widespread dispossession of indigenous peoples on a global scale, and disrupted embodied knowledge systems. Epistemic oppression justifies incalculable harm and destruction as a necessary step towards progress and will continue to do so through the normative practices that reinforce it. These epistemologies that in turn reinforced systems of Western and therefore white colonial social, economic, and political power ultimately helped construct the conditions that necessitated the creation of Afrofuturism and fomented the privatization of space. In 2020, Drs.

Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente published “Rethinking ‘Diversity’ in Publishing,” a study on diversity in trade fiction and the publishing industry in the UK that investigated the quality of the experience of minorities working within the industry (as opposed to just the number of them).¹¹⁴ Through qualitative interviews, Saha and van Lente found that the publishing industry is oriented around white and middle-class audiences, is generally incapable of reaching more diverse audiences because of a reluctance to expend the resources to do so, and that Black, Asian, and minority/working-class audiences are economically and culturally undervalued by publishers, directly affecting the “acquisition, promotion, and selling of writers of color.” Concerns about the ‘niche’ audience for minority authors, questions of ‘quality’ of their writing, and lack of interest in promoting their work to wider audiences leads to white authors being the ones whose voices get the most opportunity, exposure, and audience interest. There’s no interest in including people of color into the mainstream in any meaningful way when it comes to writing, and so the ideas that continue to be perpetuated are informed by the same normative ideas that reinforce the status quo—that this study was published in 2020 means that the necessity of Afrofuturistic and non-Westernized models of non-mimetic speculative work remain deeply important. White people write stories that reflect the role and power of whiteness—Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos have both admitted to a love of science fiction in their own childhoods, something that’s actively informed their ambitions in space. While science fiction writing and space capitalism are both drastically different industries, the way that race and power operate are the same. White people are more likely to make more money and be offered more opportunities to make money, have greater representation in government, financial industries, and

¹¹⁴ Saha, Anamik, and Sandra van Lente. “Rethinking ‘Diversity’ in Publishing.” *Goldsmiths, University of London*, 2020, https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking_diversity_in-publishing_WEB.pdf.

technological development, and therefore have the most say in how Space Race 2 will play out. Black people and other people of color will have little—if anything—to contribute to any sort of space colonialism project other than their labor, because everybody who has the power and position to determine a better (read: more ethical) pathway than privatization has no interest in doing so.

We've established that Afrofuturism can't tell the future. In some spaces, Butler's heralded as some sort of literary oracle and semi-prophet (some people have fully invested in *Earthseed* religion that she created), but she just possesses common sense and a healthy amount of caution. Butler and other Afrofuturists aren't here to tell you exactly how things will unfold, but they urge you to think about the potential. The idea that bad things can inevitably get worse if left unchecked is not isolated to the Black speculative arts movement or fiction as a genre, but when interrogating the role that whiteness plays in all of this, Afrofuturism's treatment of that theme—and response to the more specific issues highlighted within that general umbrella—can be especially useful.

Space Capitalism: Same Story, Different Place

Chapter 1 emphasized some of the major themes nestled within traditional science fiction: colonialism/imperialism, militarism, invasions, alien life as substitute for a real-life 'othered' populations—basically the intergalactic Western frontier. If we treat Space Race 2 as its own science fiction story, those characteristic tropes appear in full force. Bezos and his cowboy hat were less a questionable fashion choice and more a symbol to make him the preeminent space cowboy: a frontiersman out to conquer the unforgiving and wild cosmic wilderness. Musk's warning of an extinction-level event as a justification to colonize Mars (and

beyond) functions as a doomsday prophecy in which the only way to save humanity is to pursue the stars. Both individual's business practices reflect the sort of exploitation to serve colonial pursuit that oftentimes occurs in works of science fiction that encounter extraterrestrial civilizations, encounters that end in either warfare, genocide, or enslavement. Black people aren't present in the Billionaire Space Race as anything other than an oppressed workforce, their presence actively erased from any imagined future society due to neocolonialism's de-racialized perspective. Race doesn't need to be talked about because it isn't a problem in space—there's nobody to racialize up there. But again, if there's no entity to exploit in the stars, then the conditions of exploitation and the people subject to it will continue to thrive in their existing format, just under different circumstances. Amazon may not be able to offer 2-day shipping to the International Space Station yet, but they have contracted with Blue Origin for the delivery of satellites into orbit to extend the reach of its web services.¹¹⁵ From a military standpoint, SpaceX was awarded a 102-million-dollar contract by the U.S. Department of Defense to deliver military supplies and aid as a form of “point-to-point transit for cargo via space.”¹¹⁶ While we currently see a general respect for The Space Treaty's mandate against putting weapons in orbit, with the pushback against it as a public commons to ensure it becomes a private commodity, what's to say that states won't eventually take advantage of putting a weapon of mass destruction into orbit? There are already reports of launches of classified satellites for spy missions, and it seems

¹¹⁵ Amazon Press Team. “Amazon Secures Up to 83 Launches from Arianespace, Blue Origin, and United Launch Alliance for Project Kuiper.” *Amazon*, 22 Apr. 2022, <https://press.aboutamazon.com/news-releases/news-release-details/amazon-secures-83-launches-arianespace-blue-origin-and-united>.

¹¹⁶ Mack, Eric. “SpaceX Signs a Deal to Rocket Military Cargo around the World.” *CNET*, 20 Jan. 2022, <https://www.cnet.com/tech/tech-industry/spacex-signs-a-deal-to-rocket-military-cargo-around-the-world/#:~:text=The%20US%20Air%20Force%20is,transit%20for%20cargo%20via%20space>.

as though these companies will launch whatever they're told to so long as they get paid.¹¹⁷ Space as not just a private but a military frontier began with the alarm surrounding the launch of the Soviet Sputnik satellite in the 1960s and continues today—Donald Trump began the process to establish the Space Force as a legitimate branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, which was codified in 2020.¹¹⁸ The Space Force has been used to track the activity of enemy forces such as missile strikes and the activity of the Space Forces of other nation-states (namely Russia).¹¹⁹

Afrofuturist creatives have interacted with these thematic issues in various ways. Some treat these issues with a sense of fatalism; the bad will get worse until there's nothing much left. Janelle Monáe's 'Dirty Computer: The Emotion Picture' is a discourse on nonconformity and the role of the surveillance state in suppressing it.¹²⁰ With advances in technology that allow increased access to people's lives, heteropatriarchal norms are more adeptly enforced. People who operate outside the norm are deemed 'Dirty Computers' that must be 'cleaned.' It's relevance to the real world? Amazon's union-busting practices include the use of its app. The planned internal messaging app, the primary way that Amazon interacts with its warehouse employees, would monitor all the conversations that occur within it and subsequently flag and censor anything it deems inappropriate. Terms like "union," "grievance," "pay raise," "compensation," "ethics," "slave," "plantation," and "unfair" inhibit worker's abilities to

¹¹⁷ Harwood, Wiliam. "SpaceX Launches Secret National Reconnaissance Office Payload." *CBS News*, 22 Apr. 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/spacex-launches-secret-national-reconnaissance-office-payload/>.

¹¹⁸ "Remarks by President Trump at a Meeting with the National Space Council and Signing of Space Policy Directive-3". *White House*. 18 June 2018. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-meeting-national-space-council-signing-space-policy-directive-3/>

¹¹⁹ Hennigan, W. J. "Exclusive: Strange Russian Spacecraft Shadowing U.S. Spy Satellite, General Says." *Time*, Feb. 2020, <https://time.com/5779315/russian-spacecraft-spy-satellite-space-force/>.

¹²⁰ Donoho, Andrew and Chuck Lightning, directors. *Janelle Monáe - Dirty Computer [Emotion Picture]*. Performance by Janelle Monae, *Youtube*, 27 Apr. 2018, youtu.be/jdH2Sy-BINE.

organize and advocate for themselves as they are surveilled by their employers.¹²¹ Amazon's technological censorship parallels plantation conditions and arguably plantation surveillance in a neocolonial terrain. Monae's solution to this attack on their ability to live a meaningful life is to persist, both overtly and covertly. In the Emotion Picture, Monae's commitment is to being authentic about their identity, partying with others like them in the outskirts of society where they are less likely to be caught and punished. But even in moments of high risk, Monae doesn't dress differently, act differently, or cower in the face of nearly insurmountable odds. They are part of a rapidly diminishing population that continues to advocate for their own right exist—they come together, scatter when necessary, and regroup again. The temptation to lean towards passivity or fatalism in the face of what feels like insurmountable odds is not unheard of within Afrofuturism—many creatives use racial escapism (like in the conclusion of Sun Ra's *Space is the Place*) as a means of coping as opposed to continued resistance. If the Afrofuturist lesson here is to resist and persist, isn't that what Amazon workers continue to do? The massive corporation expends millions of dollars to bust unions, surveils and harasses employees who attempt to organize, and regularly sues to discredit elections that don't end in their favor. But organizers continue to fight back against the corporate giant despite the risks, whether successful or not. Monae doesn't offer us a solution (the Emotion Picture ends with their successful 'cleaning'), but they do offer us a strategy to resist at least one component of the neocolonial project.

When it comes to protecting space as a site for the benefit of humanity, Octavia Butler provides a solution to corporate greed in the stars. *Parable of the Sower's* philosophy is pro-

¹²¹ Klippenstein, Ken. "LEAKED: NEW AMAZON WORKER CHAT APP WOULD BAN WORDS LIKE 'UNION,' 'RESTROOMS,' 'PAY RAISE,' AND 'PLANTATION.'" *The Intercept*, 4 Apr. 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/04/04/amazon-union-living-wage-restrooms-chat-app/>.

space colony in the face of irreparable environmental destruction.¹²² On surface level, the lesson seems to be to use religion as a means of escapism and hope that technology advances fast enough for a Hail Mary: a means to live on an inhospitable planet. But digging even a little deeper unearths so many other alternatives. Protagonist Lauren Olamina's religion, Earthseed, is more than a means of escaping reality, it's a reminder to be kind, to form community with others no matter the varying perspectives, to be sharp and adaptable, and to maintain your solidarities with others as best you can. Earthseed is a lesson in empathy, and though the 'destiny' Olamina envisions for her following is to live amongst the stars, she outright disparages the privatization of outer space.¹²³ The dystopian society she lives in is one where the U.S. government has a limited ability to help its citizens, facing criticism from people who live in increasing levels of poverty whose taxpayer dollars are being invested in space colonizing programs. Butler is weighing the real-life debate that the global population faces in Space Race 2: what's more important, the still-technologically inaccessible idea of living in space or the very tangible issues people are facing right now? Politicians successfully campaign to shutter state space programs and sell off the research to the highest private bidder, and Lauren bemoans this (similarly, the United States shuttered its space shuttle program in 2011 because of a loss in public interest, lack of funding, and the tragic loss of 7 lives due to the disintegration of the space shuttle *Columbia* during its re-entry into Earth's orbit in 2003).¹²⁴ She looks at the conditions of debt-slavery and corporations capitalizing off entire communities who are backed into corners and understands

¹²² Butler, Octavia. *Parable of The Sower*. Seven Stories Press Edition, Seven Stories Press, 2016.

¹²³ Butler, Octavia. *Parable of The Sower*. Seven Stories Press Edition, Seven Stories Press, 2016., 29,36

¹²⁴ Wall, Mike. "Shuttle Columbia Launched on Its Tragic Mission 10 Years Ago." *NBC News*, 16 Jan. 2013, <https://www.nbcnews.com/science/space/shuttle-columbia-launched-its-tragic-mission-10-years-ago-flna1b8002789>.

that any care or empathy that could go into people's dreams of living in space couldn't operate within a commercial industry. The state—an institution that is supposed to protect the people—must protect space as a public good. Victor Shammass and Thomas B. Holen are inclined to agree with that sentiment in the real world.¹²⁵ They argue that one of the best ways to protect space from privatization is to honor the original humanistic bedrocks of The Space Treaty. Whilst the profiteers of Space Race 2 want to usher forth an era where a new history begins (and therefore the Earth-bound one ends), a common trope in traditional science fiction, Shammass and Holen cling to some of the core thematic tenets of Afrofuturism and contemporary speculative fiction as a means towards a more hopeful and ethical future. Memory, temporality, and history work to inform and caution the present, and from Butler, a reminder that everyday people are just as capable of changing the future as any powerful capitalist.

As chapter 2 has outlined, one of the key strategies of Space Race 2 has been through public relations. With varying degrees of success, it has attempted to represent itself and its key players as enterprising visionaries and humanists. Musk, Bezos, and Branson themselves have never called their work a part of the “Billionaire Space Race” because that billionaire is an individualized status. The world cannot be part of the Billionaire Space Race because the ability to become a billionaire relies on the restriction of wealth to as few people as possible. This race must be a public good, a public service, a public mission for capitalism to survive. The ultimate spatial fix is the only way for capitalism to continue unfettered into perpetuity, and that means it can only belong to the people with the money and means to get up there first. But a PR stunt is just a smokescreen, and while Afrofuturist creatives employ metaphor, symbolism, and allegory

¹²⁵ Shammass, Victor L., and Tomas B. Holen. “Capitalism and Outer Space: Replies to an Interlocutor.” *Dr. Victor Lund Shammass*, 18 Dec. 2019, <https://www.victorshammass.com/blog/2019/12/17/capitalism-and-outer-space>.

constantly to get their messages across, it doesn't change the fact that the core of Afrofuturistic work revolves around social critique. This is a genre that dedicates itself to telling the truth, to calling something what it is. *Parable of the Sower* firmly critiques the role that corporations play in exacerbating societal issues through their exploitation, even as they use language that represents it as otherwise. *Babel-17* by Samuel R. Delany looks at the power of lived conditions to shape and affect words and meaning, and the power of language to be used as a manipulative tool. The language Babel-17 is created as a means of warfare as it shifts perception and thought to make one a traitor to their own camp. While language hasn't been developed to be deployed as military-grade weaponry in the real world, it is used constantly as a tool to shape public perception. Musk and Bezos' ambitions towards media ownership are means of using language to shape public opinion in their favor in the same way that news stories depicting the mistreatment of their employees pits the public against them. Their mission statements and interviews are crafted to remind the public that these billionaires are invested in serving them better than the government could on its own, and privatization is the best way to see humanity saved. The logic follows that if celebrities and national heroes co-sign these enterprises by hitching free rides into suborbital space, then there can't be anything wrong with the idea of eventually living up there. And while space as a potential site for the public is fascinating to think about, it has little use as a commodity in a world rife with its own issues—chief among those being the widening wage gap that sees less and less people being able to afford these trips in the first place. Should this space age be heralded forth by people who will see it happen through the abuse of the working class? Shouldn't we care about the moral implications of this new era of humanity being paved by the exploitation of other human beings?

It's difficult to consider works of Afrofuturism as legitimate scholarship when constructing a critique of capitalism. The dystopian worlds and extra-terrestrial interactions don't offer copy-and-paste solutions to the problems Black, minority, and working-class people experience in their daily lives. But the role of the imaginary in these works is fundamental as a means of offering insight or strategies of how to operate within society differently. Afrofuturists offer everything from care and empathy to escapism and disengagement as options when dealing with the structures and institutions they strongly critique. But more than anything, the critiques embedded within speculative fiction commit themselves to their truth.

The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth

Activism requires honesty. That honesty is subjective—there are people who genuinely believe that the Earth is flat, that deny climate change as real, that have become QANON conspiracy theorists who think the Democratic party are a pedophilic cabal conducting a deep state operation to overthrow the American government—but they believe in their causes and are determined to shed light on what they think is going on. Putting together this work has oftentimes felt like constructing my own little conspiracy, complete with the cork board, red string, and looking (only slightly) crazed while muttering “it’s all connected” under my breath.

The difference between this work and the people who believe that the 1969 moon landing was a hoax is the overabundance of evidence that Space Race 2 is the continuation of a project with a historical origin that began hundreds of years ago. People want money, they want to make a lot of it, and they want to make as much of it as they can for as long as they can. Why can't that longevity be theoretically infinite? If corporations have proven histories of the exploitation of human labor for profit, then what makes anyone think that that behavior will fundamentally

change? Just because the PR teams have improved does not mean that the business practices have as well. Lip service is a shield that obscures the reality of the issue at hand and yanking the wool from one's eyes is a necessary step in seeing the truth for what it is. Calling truth to power requires being honest about what it is, and the speculative work that accomplishes this task is *Alien* (1979).¹²⁶ While *Alien* isn't a work of Afrofuturism, it's useful as a work of speculative fiction that provides a socioeconomic critique. Directed by Ridley Scott and written by Dan O'Bannon, *Alien* interrogates the role of class and expendability in the pursuit of profit. Operating under the de-racialized and instead class-oriented neocolonial argument that grounds Lee and Rover, *Alien* is very clear about what corporate ambitions are willing to justify as collateral damage. *Alien*'s plot revolves around a ship being boarded by a predatory species of alien. The crew desperately tries to first trap, then kill the alien, and through the course of the film it is revealed that the corporation that employs them is entirely willing to let them die so long as they gain access to the extraterrestrial. The crew itself is multi-gendered and (barely) multi-ethnic, with the protagonist Sigourney Weaver playing Officer Eleanor Ripley. A woman rests at the helm of the film and the plot without being overtly sexualized, and Yaphet Kotto plays Parker—the only Black person in the cast (except for the actor who plays the alien itself)—is the Chief Engineer. The project to successfully ensure that the alien makes it to Earth is overseen by the character Ash, who is eventually revealed to be an android. On several fronts, we see the stark messaging of a potential future in space when left in the hands of private interest. The use of an android to complete the task carries the larger symbolism of the devaluation of human labor in the face of corporate investments in technology that can do more work for less money. Musk himself has announced plans to develop the Tesla Bot: a humanoid robot designed to “help with

¹²⁶ Scott, Ridley, David Giler, Walter Hill, and Dan O'Bannon. *Alien*. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.

those repetitive, boring tasks that people hate doing.”¹²⁷ The use of AI as a commodity to make people’s and corporations’ lives easier has been the plot of some of the most popular science fiction works in the genre (Asimov’s *I, Robot* and James Cameron’s *The Terminator* are two such examples). But that comes with a myriad of risks. Andrew Maynard, the Associate Dean of the College of Global Futures at Arizona State University studies socially beneficial technological innovations and argues that all innovations can carry “orphan risks.” Those risks are “hard to quantify and easy to overlook and yet inevitably end up tripping up innovators,” and they parallel the experiences of the crew of the *Nostramo* in *Alien*. The Tesla bot’s AI would collect, distribute, or act on potentially sensitive information as it is designed to, and that information might not be kept private to the owner of the bot. Companies like Facebook and Google have been routinely flagged for their access to and use of the private information of their users.¹²⁸ The Tesla Bot runs the same risks. Additionally, the algorithms involved in these bots reflect the ideological biases of the people that create them—conflicts due to issues of ethical or ideological perspectives within the bot can arise. Some AI algorithms have developed highly discriminatory behaviors, becoming either racist or sexist¹²⁹. All these risks haven’t curbed the development of these technologies, but they become very significant roadblocks to being used

¹²⁷ Maynard, Andrew. *Elon Musk’s Tesla Bot Raises Serious Concerns – but Probably Not the Ones You Think*. 7 Sept. 2021, <https://theconversation.com/elon-musks-tesla-bot-raises-serious-concerns-but-probably-not-the-ones-you-think-166714>.

¹²⁸ Baron, Ethan. “Google Selling Users’ Personal Data despite Promise, Federal Court Lawsuit Claims.” *The Tampa Bay Times*, 7 May 2021, <https://www.tampabay.com/news/2021/05/07/google-selling-users-personal-data-despite-promise-federal-court-lawsuit-claims/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CGoogle%20promises%20its%20hundreds%20of,by%20Google%20CEO%20Sundar%20Pichai>.

¹²⁹ Buolamwini, Joy. “How I’m Fighting Bias in Algorithms | Joy Buolamwini - YouTube.” *YouTube*, TED, 29 Mar. 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UG_X_7g63rY.

ethically and effectively. Ash's role in *Alien* as an AI is to let the deaths of the crew occur so long as the alien stays about the ship. Morally and ethically, the android operates under the instruction of its owners with no concern about the safety of the people around it. Ash exhibits pity for their fate, but no inclination to do anything to stop it and before Ash themselves is destroyed, more than half the crew has already been killed. The classification of the *Nostramo*'s crew as expendable in the face of a potential, not guaranteed, site of research and development no matter its level of risk is a much more dramatic and fatal example of the ways in which life is rendered expendable for even perceived profit. But then again, is it so dramatic?

In December 2021, a series of tornadoes tore through the midwestern United States. Though a tornado warning had been put in place for the area, Amazon employees were tasked to stay and work at the Edmonson, Illinois site—something that an employee called standard practice for the company.¹³⁰ Leaving during extreme weather events had to come out of paid or unpaid leave allotments or the employee risked termination. At about 8:30pm, a tornado ripped through the warehouse, resulting in its collapse and the death of six employees, prompting an OSHA investigation into its safety standards. Representatives for Amazon have been in damage control mode, stating that they feel for the loss of their “Amazon family” members and are committed to ensuring the safety of their employees (despite not having designated safety bunkers for extreme weather events). The reluctance to let their employees leave for their own safety likely stemmed from the holiday season and the influx of orders that needed to be

¹³⁰ Dawson, Bethany. “Amazon Employees in Collapsing Illinois Warehouse Told to Shelter in Bathrooms and Break Rooms, They Said.” *Business Insider*, 18 Dec. 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-employees-in-collapsing-warehouse-told-to-shelter-in-bathrooms-2021-12>.

processed and delivered.¹³¹ Again and again, we see these companies prioritize profits over people, and that message resonates as the core of *Alien*'s capitalist critique. Applying Butch Lee and Red Rover's theory of the development of capitalism to the film results in this critique of capitalism becoming a critique of neocolonialism, and the parallels between *Alien* and Space Race 2 pull what is supposed to be imaginary that much closer to real life. *Alien* is honest about what the collateral could be when the scenario is people over profit even as the audience suspends its disbelief that a group of capable adults could lose against one freshly hatched extraterrestrial.

I don't argue that *Alien* is any more capable than works of Afrofuturism in predicting the future, or that speculative fiction possesses the capability. But common sense prevails and pursuing capitalism in a way that would be ethical or moral is counterintuitive to how profits are made. Octavia Butler argues that "The only lasting truth is change," and she's right, because the world is changing. Space Race 2 is the onset of a new era of technological development and hopefully, exploration into the cosmos. There are more contests and grants that ever to expand Earth's access to the rest of the galaxy, ranging from developing a space station on the moon to developing rockets capable of traveling deeper into the solar system. These contracts are being awarded to private companies, but the reliance on government space programs to authorize and fund the work remain as a last, albeit weakening, stronghold against pure unregulated privatization in the galaxy. For as much as some proponents argue that space colonialism through the free market is the most moral and ethical means of expanding humanity's access and understanding of the cosmos, we know that ethics don't factor into the false meritocracy of

¹³¹ Blumberg, Nick. "Amazon Warehouse That Collapsed During Tornado Had Structural Flaws, Attorneys Say." *WTTW News*, 12 Apr. 2022, <https://news.wttw.com/2022/04/12/amazon-warehouse-collapsed-during-tornado-had-structural-flaws-attorneys-say>.

capitalistkind, and the Space Treaty as it stands remains the best means of counteracting any extraordinary measures (at least for now).¹³²

Humanity may very well venture further than the moon in the near future. Musk may not end up on Mars to die, but if things go his way, maybe his grandchildren will. Right now, change looks paradoxically like both a cycle of historical repetition and a post-historic evolution, where colonialism repeats itself but looks just a little bit different. It's a little less Black, a little less overtly violent, and has a much more impressive public relations team behind it. The real world isn't a work of science fiction, and the supervillains aren't monsters or extra-terrestrials.¹³³ But the lasting truth of these changes happening in real time is that the underlying structures pushing them forward remain the same as they were 500 years ago. But they don't have to be, and maybe changing your mind about accepting these conditions as they are can be the beginning of a new future. Space Race 2 isn't much of an improvement over *The Devil Girl from Mars* when it comes to plot, and if Octavia Butler could write a better story than that, then maybe we can too. We just have to commit ourselves to imagining it.

¹³² Nelson, Peter L., and Walter Block. *Space Capitalism: How Humans Will Colonize Planets, Moons, and Asteroids*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

¹³³ Instead, they're middle-aged white men.

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